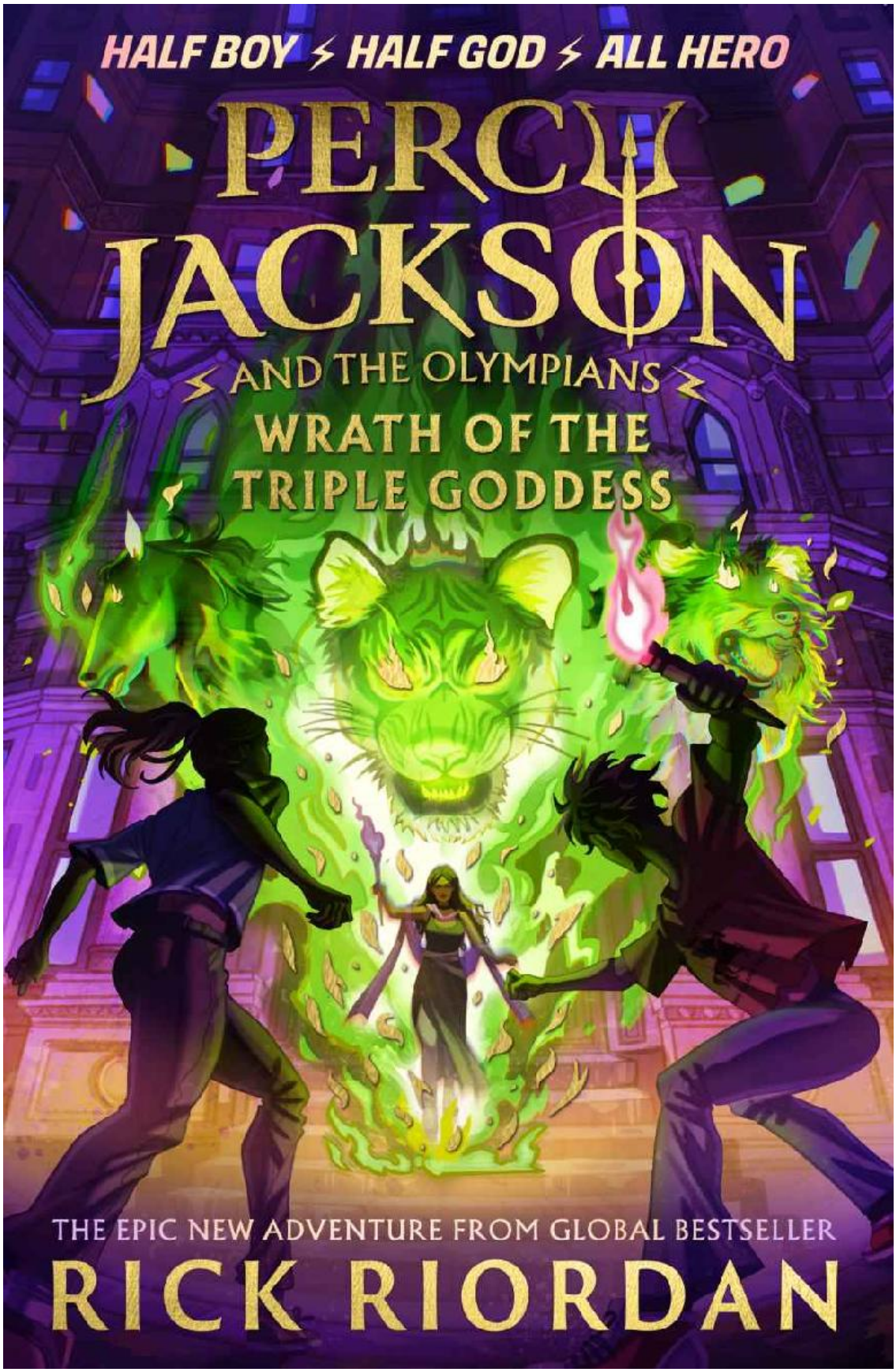
HALF BOY ⚡ HALF GOD ⚡ ALL HERO
PERCY JACKSON
AND THE OLYMPIANS
WRATH OF THE TRIPLE GODDESS
THE EPIC NEW ADVENTURE FROM GLOBAL BESTSELLER
RICK RIORDAN

About the Author

RICK RIORDAN (he/him), dubbed ‘storyteller of the gods’ by *Publishers Weekly*, is the author of five *New York Times* number one bestselling series and the number one bestselling standalone novel *Daughter of the Deep*. He is known for his Percy Jackson and the Olympians books, which bring Greek mythology to life for contemporary readers. The first book in the series, *The Lightning Thief*, has won numerous awards, and has been adapted into a feature film, a graphic novel, a Broadway musical and a live action series on Disney+ that Rick co-wrote and executive produced.

The most recent additions to the world of Percy Jackson are *The Sun and the Star: A Nico di Angelo Adventure*, which Rick co-wrote with award-winning author Mark Oshiro, and *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Chalice of the Gods*. Rick is also the publisher of an imprint at Disney

Hyperion called Rick Riordan Presents, dedicated to finding other authors of highly entertaining fiction based on world cultures and mythologies. He lives in Boston, Massachusetts, with his wife and co-producer Becky.

For more information, go to www.RickRiordan.com.

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PERCY JACKSON
AND THE OLYMPIANS

WRATH OF THE TRIPLE GODDESS

RICK RIORDAN

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To our friends at 20th TV and Disney+—

we couldn't imagine a crew better to sail with into the Sea of Monsters

O N E

I Have an Accident in the Principal’s Office October. Best month ever.

The air was crisp. The leaves were changing colors in Central Park. And my favorite food cart on 86th Street was serving pumpkin-spice burritos.

On top of all that, I’d had ZERO recent trouble from the mythological world. No gods had knocked on my door demanding that I run their errands.

No monsters had tried to kill me.

For three blissful weeks, I’d been a normal senior in high school. And when you’re the demigod son of Poseidon, normalcy is a nice change of pace—even if it comes with a side of homework and weekend tutoring.

You may be wondering, *Why would a powerful demigod in his last year of high school need trivial help like weekend tutoring?*

Maybe you haven't met me. For starters, I'm dyslexic with ADHD. Little things like reading and paying attention are tougher for me than, say, leaping out of a classroom window to fight a fire-breathing boar. Weirdly, teachers don't grant extra credit for slaying monster pigs.

Also, I'd missed my entire junior year thanks to some business we won't get into (Hera) on account of some meddling gods (Hera) for reasons of a cosmic apocalypse (Hera).

So there I was at Alternative High School, the only place that would let me complete a diploma in time to attend college with my girlfriend. In order to make up for all the credits I'd missed through no fault of my own (Hera), I had to take weekend courses.

On Saturdays, I had a dual-credit Spanish class with Dr. Hernandez at Borough of Manhattan Community College. Sundays, I took an online chemistry class. Monday mornings, when I really needed a break, I'd stumble into school with a throbbing headache and try to get through my regular classes without letting my brain leak out of my ears.

Every once in a while, my school counselor, Eudora, would step out of her office and give me a thumbs-up. "You're doing great!"

But mostly she left me alone. She was secretly a Nereid, working for my father. I think I made her nervous. Either that or she was afraid to ask how

my college recommendations were coming along. I'd done a quest for Ganymede and gotten a letter from him, but I still needed endorsements from two more Greek gods if I wanted to get into New Rome University.

And they weren't going to come for free, of course.

My application deadline was approaching, and things had been quiet.

Too quiet. In fact, things were so quiet I fell asleep in English class and didn't realize it until the teacher stood right over me and said, "Percy?"

I jolted awake. Luckily, I didn't draw my sword.

"Theme!" I yelled, because that's the question I'd been preparing to answer before I nodded off. "The theme is free will versus fate."

Mrs. Foray frowned. The other students tried not to laugh.

"Your aunt is in the office." Mrs. Foray handed me a note. "She's come to pick you up."

There were several problems with this. First, it made me look like a doofus—being picked up by a family member when I was perfectly capable of taking the subway. I even had my driver's license, though driving in New York was way scarier than most quests I'd been on.

Second, if I left school early, it would mean makeup work and grumpy teachers.

Third, I didn't have an aunt. At least, not on the human side of my family

…

I mumbled an apology to Mrs. Foray, wiped drool off my cheek, and headed for the office. Something told me I'd still be able to use that answer about free will versus fate. It seemed to be the theme of my life.

When I passed the counselor's office, Eudora stuck her head out, looking startled.

"Hi," I said. "You know anything about—?"

"SHHH! I'm not here!" She closed her door.

That was a little weird, even for her. I wondered if Nereids were like groundhogs. Maybe if they saw their shadows when they poked their heads out of their dens, it meant six more weeks of hibernation.

When I got to the reception desk, the secretary was standing there frozen, staring at nothing. She pointed at the principal's office and murmured,

"They are waiting."

Entranced secretary. Probably not a good sign.

I rapped my knuckles on the principal's door. It creaked open. Inside, Dr.

Samuels sat motionless at her desk, her eyes glassy. Next to her stood a

middle-aged woman in a dark sleeveless gown. A chain of diamonds glittered around her neck. Her hair was a thicket of black tufts, wreathed in a halo of green fire.

Flaming hair. Definitely not a good sign.

"Ah, good," said the woman in black. She glanced at the principal. "You may leave us now."

Dr. Samuels rose and wandered off, closing the door behind her. I imagined my school administrators were going to get pretty tired of having their jobs taken by mythological beings. First Eudora became my guidance counselor. Now this woman in black was moving into the principal's office.

One of these days I was going to find that our athletic director had been replaced by a poison-breathing dragon … though on second thought, I'm not sure anyone would notice the difference.

The woman in black settled into the principal's chair. She smoothed her hands across the armrests as if assessing her new throne. She seemed to find it satisfactory. Before she could start laughing maniacally or monologuing about how the school was now hers, all hers, I decided I'd better speak.

"Hi," I said. I have a way with words.

"You may continue to stand, Percy Jackson." She ran her fingers lovingly across the chipped Formica desk. "I do not anticipate this will take long."

I tried to not dwell on the many ways she could kill me instantly. “And you are—?”

I didn’t mean to sound rude. Sometimes, the gods just don’t think to introduce themselves, and I was beginning to suspect this lady was in the *god* category of Super-Powerful Annoying Things.

Her onyx eyes glittered. She sat forward and laced her fingers, looking more like a principal than my real principal ever did. “You may call me the Torch Bearer, the Star Walker, the Night Wanderer, the Disturber of the Dead, the daughter of Perses and Asteria, the Triple Goddess!”

“Uh-huh,” I said, still clueless.

You’re probably thinking, *Percy, you’ve been dealing with the Greek gods for years. How could you not know her?*

The thing is, immortals are always changing their appearance. And there are hundreds of Greek gods. Also, they’re reluctant to give you straight answers. It’s never *Hi, I’m Zeus*. It’s always *I am the Thunder-Maker, the Paranoid Patriarch, Heavenly Adulterer, Lightning Britches, King of Luxurious Beard Products*.

The *triple goddess* thing did spark a memory somewhere in the back of my mind, but Greek Myth Land is full of triple goddesses: The Fates. The Gray Sisters. The Furies. Destiny’s Child. I couldn’t keep track of them all.

I waited for the goddess to elaborate. That seemed like the safest thing to do.

She frowned. Maybe she was irritated that I didn’t grovel or burn an offering or something.

“I am *Hecate*,” she said, loud and slow. “Goddess of magic, crossroads, necromancy?”

My tongue turned to sand. I’d never formally met Hecate, but I knew her work. I remembered her from such hits as “I Joined Kronos During the

Battle of Manhattan (But Then Switched Sides)" and "I Helped Your Friend Hazel Fight a Giant (But Only After I Knew the Giants Would Lose)."

Hecate had always struck me as a team player—as soon as she was sure which team would win.

"Right," I said. "Lady Hecate."

My continued lack of groveling did not seem to please her. Well, she was going to have to deal with it. I wasn't much of a groveler.

"I assume you've had a restful few weeks?" she asked. "The other gods have left you alone as I requested?"

"I—Wait. *As you requested?* "

She waved her hand like she was clearing smoke. "I told them to stay away from you. I couldn't risk you getting damaged or killed before you undertook *my* quest!"

My fingernails cut grooves into my palms.

I remembered something my girlfriend, Annabeth, had once told me: *Always count to five before saying something in anger to a divine being.*

This would theoretically reduce my chances of being turned into a smoldering heap of charcoal briquettes.

I managed to count to two. "There were other gods who wanted to give me quests?"

"Oh, yes. Several."

"And you told them …"

"You were off-limits. I needed you fresh for this week!"

A few ancient Greek cuss words floated through my mind.

I only needed two more recommendation letters. Apparently, I could've gotten them both by now, except Hecate had snatched me from the jaws of

success.

This time I counted to three before responding. I was improving. "And these other quests would have been—?"

"Unworthy of your time!" Hecate insisted. "Fetching a box of cupcakes for Aphrodite. A day of waterskiing with Hermes. All much too easy!"

Waterskiing and cupcakes. I decided not to scream, because if Hecate was scary enough to keep all the other gods away from me, she was scary with a capital SCARE.

"And *your* quest is … worthy of my time."

"Absolutely! Your task shall be—"

"Hold on." In the back of my mind, a red light flashed … a warning, a memory? Something Eudora had told me. Oh, right …

"My counselor told me I need to request dual credit before I undertake a quest," I said. "So, like, if I have to do favors for any other gods along the way, they can write me recommendation letters too."

Hecate spread her arms generously. "That's no problem!"

"Great."

"Because no other gods will be involved in what I'm asking you to do, so it won't matter!"

She beamed like she was waiting for a thank-you.

"What's the quest?" I grumbled.

"Pet-sitting."

“Excuse me?”

“Pet-sitting! Starting tonight through Friday evening, you will stay at my house and watch my animals. As you know, this is an important time of year for me.”

“Because … Oh, Friday. Halloween.”

It made sense that the goddess of creepy stuff would have that date circled on her calendar. The only problem was, my friends and I already had plans for Friday.

“Alas …” Hecate sighed. “My sacred days used to happen at the end of *every* month. I would travel the world collecting gifts that my worshippers left for me on their doorsteps. Over the past few centuries, the offerings have been slim. But at the end of October, people still remember me! So I must travel the world and make my presence known. While I’m gone, you must watch my hellhound and polecat.”

There was a lot to unpack in that statement. My big takeaway was that Hecate was going trick-or-treating. She seemed to believe that Halloween had been created just for her.

On the one hand, that was some god-level narcissism.

On the other hand, who was I to stand between a goddess and her Tootsie Rolls?

“So, these pets …” I said. “I know a little about hellhounds. But polecats

… do they eat polecat chow? Anything I should know?”

Hecate chuckled. “Many things. But we’ll go over that later.”

She produced a black business card, which she slid across the table.

Written on the front, in glistening red like fresh blood, was an address: THE

MANSE, GRAMERCY PARK WEST.

“Arrive at sunset,” she said. “Then I will go over the rules for keeping my pets healthy and happy.”

“Sunset … tonight.”

She frowned. “Do you have water in your ears? Yes. Tonight. You may bring those friends of yours … Anna and Groverbeth.”

Close enough, I thought.

“Okay, I’ll do it,” I said, because what choice did I have? But I must not have sounded very excited.

Hecate rose from her desk. “Percy Jackson, I am offering you the chance for a recommendation letter from *me*: a major goddess, the Torch Bearer—”

“The Star Walker, yeah, I get it. It’s just that I’ll have to move a few things around on my schedule ….”

Hecate lifted her arms. Darkness spread from the folds of her dress, filling the room with an inky fog. “This will be an easy assignment, Percy Jackson. If you succeed, I will be grateful. If you fail me, however …”

Her body shimmered and stretched. Suddenly, I was looking at three distinct goddesses, all linked at the torso like gemstones on a single ring.

On the left, a girl with milk-white skin and platinum-blond hair fixed me with a steely gaze that said, *Pull my pigtails. I dare you.* In the middle stood the Hecate I had been talking to—a middle-aged lady with the most disapproving mom-face I’d seen since my last brunch at Hera’s. On the right, a wizened old woman with ashen hair gave me a sour scowl.

Honestly, I wasn’t sure which face scared me the most.

“I am the Maiden,” said Hecate in a chorus of three voices. “I am the Mother. I am the Crone. I am all phases of a woman’s life—all her power—

and I will suffer no man to cross me.”

A tremor went through my body. My legs shook.

But she wasn't done with me yet. She changed again. Her three faces became animal heads. On the left, a palomino horse whinnied angrily. In the middle, a lioness snarled and bared her fangs. On the right, a hound growled and slavered, its eyes ablaze.

"I am the horse that runs strong and fearless," she said, her voices unchanged. "I am the lion that prowls stealthy and patient. I am the hound that stands guard, loyal and fierce. I am goddess of the crossroads, where all possibilities intersect. I devour those who waver before me."

My body felt flushed—warm, damp, and unpleasant. My gut seemed to dissolve into my jeans.

Finally, the room cleared of darkness. Before me stood Hecate in a single form, the way she'd been at the beginning.

She gave me a tight smile, probably because she could see that she'd made her point.

"See you tonight, then," she said. "Ciao."

In a burst of green fire, she disappeared, leaving nothing behind but the smell of burning animal hair.

I stared at Dr. Samuels's education degrees framed on the wall.

When I felt like my legs could move again, I wobbled out of the office. I needed to finish my school day. I needed to contact Annabeth and Grover.

But first I needed to go to my gym locker and change my undershorts.

T W O

Grover Gets Heavily Caffeinated

“Fun fact,” said Grover. “Obscure knowledge is called *trivia* because of Hecate’s Roman name, Trivia! *Three roads!* ”

“That may be a fact,” I said. “But it’s not fun.”

“Aw, c’mon! You got a quest. This is great news!”

Grover danced and skipped along the sidewalk in front of me. The cooler October weather always made him perky. As soon as I’d mentioned my encounter with Hecate, he’d gotten even more excited.

Today, his shaggy hindquarters were stuffed into cargo pants. His goat hooves were sort-of-not-really concealed in a modified pair of orange Crocs (because inconspicuous?). His horns peeked through his shaggy hair. His blue hoodie was emblazoned with the word HUMAN.

I'd never understood satyr rules for blending into the mortal world.

Usually, they tried to disguise themselves as people to some extent. Mostly they seemed to rely on the Mist, the veil that confused human vision, to do the job for them. But when Grover opted for Crocs and a HUMAN hoodie, I had to wonder why he bothered at all. Maybe he was trying to explode mortal brains.

"You're just excited about the pets," I guessed.

Grover grinned from ear to ear, which made him look like he had extra AI-generated teeth. "If Hecate's hellhound is anything like Mrs. O'Leary, I'll love her!"

"I wouldn't bet on that."

"And polecats …" Grover paused. "Actually, I'm not sure I've ever met a polecat. But I'm willing to make friends. Come on!"

He trotted down Lexington Avenue.

We'd met at the 103rd Street subway station—our usual after-school rendezvous point. Now we were going to visit my mom at her favorite café, where she was trying to finish writing her new book. Normally I wouldn't have interrupted her while she was working, but I figured I'd better tell her about Hecate's quest as soon as possible, since we were supposed to start

the pet-sitting gig that night. Also, Grover liked seeing my mom. Also, he liked the café's pastries. It was a win-win.

New York is weird in the best kinds of ways. You can be strolling down the avenue, past banks and pharmacies and cell phone stores, feeling like you're in the middle of cookie-cutter Anywhere Land. Then you turn left,

and suddenly you're on a side street where the old brownstone mansions have been converted into bohemian apartments, the trees are aglow with string lights year-round, and the storefronts are a mixture of holistic laundromats, tarot card salons, cryo-shock spas, and cafés.

The best café of all? The Cracked Teapot.

No hate to the folks who hang out at Starbucks writing their screenplays or whatever. But if you really want inspiration, find a local, one-of-a-kind place like the Cracked Teapot.

All the string lights on the street seemed to emanate from the café's front porch, like the center of a festive electric web that nobody had bothered to clear away and now covered the whole neighborhood.

We walked down the steps to the garden level, through a bead-curtained doorway, and into a cozy maze of nooks and parlors. Soft, otherworldly music was playing—Celtic harp, maybe? Fairy-godmother dolls hung from the ceiling. On every available sunny windowsill, cats were napping, which may or may not have been against city health codes, but I wasn't going to tell. All through the café, shelves were filled with—you guessed it—

cracked teapots. Some were gold and porcelain, some copper, some rainbow ceramic. Stuffed animals popped out of many of them.

Behind the counter, a large bearded dude in a pink tutu was making coffee. The display case overflowed with muffins, cookies, cakes, and scones.

Could *I* have written a novel there? No way. Aside from the fact that I could never write a novel anywhere, this place was way too distracting. I guess that's proof that I got my ADHD from my dad's side. My mom loved working there. It was only a few blocks from our apartment, and with the baby coming, she felt the deadline for her second manuscript pressing down on her. It was a race between the baby and the book, and the baby was winning.

Grover and I ordered drinks and snacks from the ballet dancer. Then we found my mom at her usual table in the back, where sunlight slanted

through a transom window, warming a big black cat on the sill and

refracting though dozens of crystal pendants that reminded me a little too much of the goddess Iris.

My mom’s hair was pulled back in a bun to keep it from falling in her face while she typed. She leaned forward, her face glowing in the light of the laptop screen like she wanted to dive into the world she was creating.

She wore a stretchy dark skirt to accomodate her baby bump and one of my stepdad’s T-shirts—a black one with a picture of a dude playing a stand-up bass under the name CHARLES MINGUS.

Next to her was a steaming pot of tea, probably lemon balm herbal, which she’d started drinking instead of coffee since she got pregnant. She rarely ate here—she made her own baked goods, so I guess she didn’t see the point—but the café staff loved her regardless. They never complained if she took up a table for the whole afternoon.

I was worried she might frown when she saw us walking up, since we were technically interrupting her workday, but she smiled with relief.

“Boys!” she said.

“Sorry to barge in,” Grover said.

“Not at all!” She patted the chair next to her. “Save me from this dialogue, please. I think it’s trying to kill me.”

Grover slid in next to her. I sat across the table. I’m always careful not to look at my mom’s screen while she’s writing, because a) I know it makes her nervous, b) the floating words make me queasy, and c) I can’t help wondering if she’s writing a character based on me. Maybe that sounds self-centered, but the idea of anybody writing a book about me makes me super paranoid.

“So, what’s going on?” she asked me. “New quest?”

“It’s like you know me.”

She laughed. “Tell me all.”

She must have been worried. Over the last seventeen years, I’d put her through a chariot-load of stress, but she’d gotten good at keeping her tone light and supportive. Honestly, I’m not sure how she did it. The only job harder than being a demigod is being a demigod’s mom.

I told her about my visit to the goddess/principal’s office. I left out a few need-to-know details like Hecate’s three-headed horror show and my subsequent change of underwear. I’d just finished bringing her up to speed when Mr. Ballerina brought us our order: a blueberry smoothie for me, a double-shot latte and a strawberry muffin for Grover.

I gave Grover the side-eye. There are two things that will send him into a hyperactive meltdown. One is coffee. The other is strawberry-flavored anything.

“It’ll be fine,” he promised when he saw me judging. “I’m going to jog to the park after this, pick up some supplies for tonight. I’ll burn off all the extra energy!”

I wondered what kind of supplies he could pick up in Central Park. I imagined him showing up at Hecate’s house with a basketful of squirrels.

“And this place, the ‘manse,’” my mom said, “where is it?”

I took out the blood-inscribed business card and handed it to her.

She read the address, and her smile crumbled. “Oh.”

“Oh?” I asked.

She gazed at the cat sleeping in the window as if it might have advice for her. “Nothing. I haven’t been to Gramercy Park in a very long time. Did I ever tell you …?” She hesitated, thinking better of whatever she was about to say. “No. It’s fine. Promise me you’ll be careful.”

It’s fine and *Be careful* are not statements that go together well, especially when it’s your mom talking. Also, she said *Gramercy Park* the way I said

Tartarus. I wasn't sure if she was holding something back because it was a bad memory, or because Grover was with me, or both.

She shouldn't have worried about Grover. He was obsessed with his muffin and coffee. Once he went into snacking mode, the only danger was that he might devour everything else on the table, including my smoothie, the teapot, and my mom's laptop.

"I always try to be careful," I promised. "Emphasis on *try*."

I waited to see if she would say anything else.

When she didn't, I made a mental note to follow up with her later. One thing about me and my mom: she never pushes me to talk about something if I'm not ready. I try to give her the same courtesy.

Meanwhile, Grover was dabbing up the last of his muffin crumbs. I could practically feel him starting to vibrate.

"We should get going!" he said. "Lots to do! I've got to run around the park, and you have to pack for tonight! Meet up at sunset, right?"

I nodded, still focused on my mom.

"You want me to wait around at the apartment until you get home?" I asked her. I was thinking I could have dinner with her and Paul, give her another chance to tell me why Gramercy Park bothered her so much.

"No, no, that's all right." She managed to reconstruct her careful smile.

"This should be a memorable Halloween experience for you, at any rate.

Hecate is the goddess of ghosts, isn't she?"

"And magic!" Grover volunteered. "And nighttime! And manipulating the Mist!"

I frowned. Hecate had run through her entire résumé while she was terrifying me with flames and animal heads, but she'd left out the part about

manipulating the Mist. I wondered why. Now that I thought about it, my friend Hazel had said something along those lines … how the goddess had encouraged her to learn that skill.

My mom reached across the table and squeezed my hand. “I should probably try to get some more writing done. Keep me posted if you can.

And remember to pack your toothbrush, okay?”

We were going to spend Halloween week in a creepy goddess’s house, and all my mom was worried about was my dental hygiene. I guess she had to focus on the things she could help with.

“I will,” I said. “Uh … good luck with the writing.”

I realized I’d barely tasted my blueberry smoothie. I carried it out while Grover bounced along at my side, rambling about his strategies for making friends with godly house pets.

I glanced back at my mom one last time. She was frowning intently at her computer screen, but I doubted she would be doing any more writing this afternoon. Instead, she’d be googling Hecate. I wondered what about Gramercy Park had made her so unsettled. I had a feeling I’d soon find out

….

T H R E E

My Girlfriend Takes Me to the Graveyard After grabbing my demigod go bag (complete with toothbrush) at home, I headed downtown to find Annabeth.

The School of Design, New York City, is a private boarding school not far from Gramercy Park. I figured it would be easier to find Annabeth there in person rather than trying to send an Iris-message. Demigods can’t use cell phones (monster homing beacon, instant death, etc.). Iris-messages are a good substitute, but they require some planning. You don’t want to appear as a shimmering rainbow vision and start talking to your friend when there are a bunch of mortal observers around. (Side effects can include panic attacks, mass hysteria, and psychological misdiagnoses. Ask your doctor if Iris-messages are right for you.)

SODNYC occupies a cluster of townhouses and office buildings right off the Bowery. If not for the banners hanging outside, you'd never guess there is a school there. I didn't know my way around the whole campus, but I knew the three places where I was most likely to find Annabeth: her dormitory, the library, and the Black Ant, a Mexican restaurant around the corner. Figuring that she liked to study in the afternoon, I headed for the library.

Technically, they shouldn't have allowed me in. The library is for students only, but the security guard on duty, Florence, knew me and liked me, so she just smiled and nodded as I walked past. See? I can be charming when I'm not causing chaos. Sometimes even when I *am* causing chaos.

This month's student art display featured "recycled clothing"—in this case meaning a bunch of evening gowns and tuxedos made from plastic bags, candy wrappers, and flattened aluminum cans. I didn't understand it, but I guess that's why I wasn't in design school.

I climbed the stairs to the third floor. Annabeth was camped out in her usual spot—a comfy sofa arrangement in the architecture section—with her study buddies, Dave and Hana, who were laughing quietly at something Annabeth had just said. She wore an oversize UC Berkeley sweatshirt, distressed jeans, and new Doc Martens. Her hair was Dutch-braided, the

tails curled over her shoulders like raptor talons. Her eyes gleamed with humor.

I'm not sure if you've ever had this experience—when you see someone you know from a distance, and for a split second you don't recognize them.

Your brain just registers, *Oh, that person looks amazing.* Then you realize it's someone you've known for years—your girlfriend, in fact—and that sends a tingle of happiness through your whole body.

Sure, maybe I had a twinge of angst, too, because she was sitting there laughing with other people, and for the moment I was on the outside. I wouldn't call it jealousy, though. More like anxious motivation. Annabeth

was a natural people person. Everybody wanted to hang out with her and get her approval. She would always succeed whether I was around or not.

That made me even more determined to graduate and get into college with her, even if it meant doing torturous activities like studying or reading.

Wow, the power she had over the way I thought … kinda scary. As a son of Poseidon, all I can do is make watercoolers explode and talk to walruses.

“Hey,” I said.

Dave made room for me on the couch. “’Sup, Percy?”

Hana gave me a forced smile. I don’t think she liked me very much, maybe because she wasn’t sure I was good enough for Annabeth … which, hey, fair concern, but I always tried to be nice to her.

Annabeth took my hand. “We were just talking about our new assignment

—redesigning the Met.”

“Oh, nice.” I tried not to shudder. I’d had a bad experience at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and by *bad experience* I mean almost getting killed by my sixth-grade math teacher when she turned out to be a Fury.

“I would go full postmodern,” Dave said. “Like, really open up the space and get rid of the classic columns and stuff. That’s so last century.”

“I’d make it avant-garde,” Hana said. “Escher-esque stairways everywhere. You know?”

She aimed the question at me like a challenge. I had no idea what she was talking about, so I just nodded.

“What would you do, Percy?” Dave asked.

I had a moment of panic. I managed to avoid blurting out that the theme was free will versus fate. The only Met redesign I could think of would be to build safe rooms and sword dispensers everywhere so young demigods

could survive monster attacks more easily. But I couldn't exactly share that with Hana and Dave.

"No idea," I admitted. "I'll leave designing to the experts." I turned to Annabeth. "What was your idea?"

Dave and Hana started giggling again.

"I was just telling them," Annabeth said. "Glass and marshmallows."

"Sorry?"

"Glass and marshmallows."

"Genius," said Dave.

"Bonkers," said Hana.

"I don't get it," I said.

The nearest librarian glanced over and raised an eyebrow. It wasn't a *shhh*, but it was as close as I'd ever gotten.

Annabeth continued at a lower volume. "So you know how the Met has thousands of pieces of art just sitting in warehouses? My plan is to triple the display space—redo the whole building as a giant spiral of glass floors and walls around a central atrium. The art would be protected inside the glass, and those see-through panels would let you examine the art from the back, the front, above, below. You'd feel like you were floating in a three-dimensional cloud of art."

"And the marshmallows?" I asked, because I tend to focus on things that are tasty.

"Big, soft white beanbag chairs," she said, "all through the museum. No more uncomfortable benches. When kids come in, they can flop anywhere they want and relax and enjoy the art."

"Or take a nap," I suggested.

“That’s valid, too!” Annabeth said. “It’s a public space. Why not take a nap with a statue of Athena or a Frida Kahlo self-portrait?”

“Comfy marshmallows in a glass temple,” I said. “Okay, I’m sold.”

She squeezed my hand. “So, what’s up with you?”

“Oh, just … got an assignment I wasn’t expecting. I wondered if you could help.”

Annabeth’s expression turned more serious. She knew exactly what I was saying, even if Dave and Hana didn’t.

“She can’t do *all* your homework for you, dude,” Hana said.

“Yeah, she has to do *our* homework,” Dave said.

“Ugh, you two,” Annabeth said, but she gave them a smile. “Okay, Jackson, I can spare you a few minutes. Come on.” She hauled me up and led me out of the library, Paul and Hana whispering behind our backs, probably wondering what Annabeth saw in me given my complete ignorance of architectural design.

Outside, we walked to Annabeth’s favorite thinking spot—a park bench under a maple tree in a nearby churchyard. She’d told me some famous architect was buried there. Peter Stuyvesant? Yeah, that’s the dude. They’d named like half the stuff in the neighborhood for him, so he must’ve been great with glass and marshmallows.

Annabeth said she felt inspired there, which was good enough for me. We sat watching the traffic crawl along Second Avenue, enjoying the perfect weather—cool, crisp and sunny, the kind you wanted to bottle up and open in the middle of August when Manhattan was a swamp.

“So …” Annabeth turned to face me. “What’s the quest?”

I told her about my meeting with Hecate.

Annabeth listened with the kind of intensity most people only give to their favorite songs—like she wanted to memorize every word, analyze the meaning of every line and how it made her feel. She is a natural problem solver. Once I finished bringing her up to speed, I expected her to frown and start running mental equations, gaming out scenarios for all the things that might go wrong during a school week as Hecate's house sitters.

Instead, she laughed.

"That's awesome!" She kissed me on the cheek like I'd given her a gift.

"It is?" I asked. "Which part—taking care of demonic pets? Or getting incinerated if we fail?"

She waved away my concerns. "We won't fail. Look, if I can play fetch with Cerberus, I can take care of a hellhound and a polecat."

I winced. I still have nightmares about Hades's three-headed guard dog.

Sometimes I wake up smelling Cerberus's sulfurous breath in my face before I realize I just need to brush my teeth. For Annabeth, though, our meeting with Cerberus had been the best part of our first excursion into the Underworld. Granted, that wasn't saying much.

"Besides," she said, "this means we have a venue for our party!"

"Oh … you don't … Wait, seriously?"

She didn't look like she was kidding. A few weeks ago, Annabeth had confided that she'd always wanted to design a haunted house. She'd grown

up mostly at Camp Half-Blood, so she'd never done any of the typical Halloween activities like trick-or-treating, scary movies, or costume parties.

She dreamed of creating a terrifying experience for all our friends. To me, that seemed a little strange, since we had terrifying experiences all year round without having to design them.

This being our last year in high school, Annabeth was determined to achieve this goal. The only problem was that she lived in a dorm and I lived in a tiny apartment. We couldn't have a haunted house at camp, either, because our camp director, Mr. D, wouldn't allow it. It's hard to know why

—probably because if he couldn't have fun, nobody could have fun, and Mr. D's idea of fun would have been to turn us all into Amazon river dolphins. I didn't want to test him.

We'd half-heartedly planned our Halloween party for this coming Friday in Central Park, but it wasn't ideal. Annabeth couldn't construct a house of horrors there. Even hanging decorations in the trees would be risky—the cops were liable to chase us off. Besides, running around the park in costumes would feel too much like LARPing.

"You *are* serious," I realized. "You want to have our party at Hecate's mansion?"

"Well, she's not going to be there," Annabeth pointed out. "We just have to figure out what time she'll be back and finish cleaning up before that.

Why not?"

I wasn't even sure where to start with the *why not* s. Usually *I* was the one suggesting boneheaded ideas. It was Annabeth's job to explain all the reasons why they were boneheaded. I wasn't used to our switching roles.

"Uh, I mentioned the incineration, didn't I? Also, Hecate's the goddess of the Mist and magic. Don't you think she'll know if we have a party at her house?"

"Hecate thinks Halloween is all about her, right? If she finds out, she'll probably see the party as a form of worship. Besides, we'll be super respectful."

"Respectful," I said. "Have you met our friends?"

“I wonder if her house has enough cobwebs,” Annabeth mused, “or if I should buy some more ….”

“Now my arachnophobic girlfriend is talking about buying cobwebs.

Who *are* you?”

“No spiders,” she said. “Just cobwebs. For ambience! Listen, I’m going to run and get my stuff. I’ll ask Hana to cover for me since I won’t be sleeping in the dorm this week. Oh my gods, this is so great! I’ll meet you at the Black Ant in an hour. We’ll get dinner to go!”

She kissed me and ran off toward her dormitory.

So … both Grover and Annabeth were weirdly excited about the Hecate challenge. There were cobwebs, a weasel, and Mexican food in my immediate future. Even by my standards, this was going to be a strange week.

F O U R

Turns Out I Am Salmon-Flavored I could have done without the grasshopper pizza.

When we picked up dinner at the Black Ant, Annabeth decided to get adventurous. Along with our usual enchiladas and tacos, she ordered the tlayudas—basically beans, cheese, and spicy grasshoppers baked on a large tortilla.

“They’re really good,” she assured me. “And bug protein is way more sustainable than other meats.”

“Grover’s a vegetarian,” I reminded her.

“I got him mushroom tacos.”

“I am also considering becoming a vegetarian. At least for tonight.”

“Oh, stop,” she said. “You need to try new things! Besides, we should eat something special for our first night at Hecate’s.”

I shut up and decided to count my blessings that the Black Ant didn’t offer eye-of-newt enchiladas. We collected our bagful of mushroom and grasshopper entrées, then headed uptown to Gramercy Park.

I’d never spent much time in that neighborhood. It kind of screamed *Rich people live here. Move along, Percy Jackson.* Rows of elegant brownstones and fancy apartment buildings faced a leafy rectangular park, which was surrounded by a black wrought-iron fence to keep out the riffraff. From what I’d heard, you could only get into the park if you owned one of the surrounding residences, which granted you a key to open the gates. I guess that made the area attractive to billionaires. They could boast about having a Gramercy Park key if they got tired of boasting about the sports teams or private jets they owned. Personally, I didn’t get the appeal. Manhattan has hundreds of perfectly good public parks that are a lot bigger and free.

Maybe that’s why I’ll never be a billionaire.

I figured it would be easy to find Hecate’s house. Gramercy Park West is only a block long. Even without knowing the house number, all we had to do was stroll down the sidewalk looking for a place witchy enough to be the goddess’s secret lair.

We passed the “manse” twice before we spotted it.

The whole facade was an optical illusion. If you looked at it from either side, its features blurred, blending into the other townhouses around it. The mansion only revealed itself when you looked at it dead-on.

Despite the clear evening, a layer of fog hung over the narrow front yard.

Tendrils of mist curled through skeletal white bushes in the garden. A walkway made of cobblestones—or maybe human craniums—wound toward the front porch.

The townhouse itself was a five-story patchwork of weathered granite slabs—literal tombstones, some with the names and dates of the deceased still visible. Crouching gargoyles leered down at us from either side of the gabled roof. Black cast-iron filigree framed the windows, ran across the railing of the second-floor balcony, and spilled down either side of the main entrance like a mourning shawl made of metal lace. If Hecate wasn't renting this place out for funerals and goth mitzvahs, she was missing out on big bucks.

"Okay, you're right," I told Annabeth. "This is already a perfect haunted house."

"See?" Annabeth stepped back and studied the roofline. "I bet those gargoyles come to life."

"Not taking that bet."

My fingers twitched. I was tempted to grab my pen-sword from my pocket, but I didn't think it would do me much good. If Hecate decided to attack us with gargoyles, tombstones, or evil shrubbery … Well, it was her front yard. She could do what she wanted.

I remembered my mom's unsettled expression when I'd mentioned Gramercy Park. She was one of the rare mortals who could see through the Mist. I wondered if what had happened to her down here had anything to do with this half-invisible mansion ….

"You okay?" Annabeth asked. "Look, you don't have to eat the grasshopper tlayudas—"

"It's not that," I said. "It's just …"

I struggled to complete the thought. I had a bad feeling. I wasn't sure why. As usual, my ratio of answers to bad feelings was way out of balance.

Before I could find words, I heard the clopping of hooves on pavement.

Either a horse carriage had veered off course from Central Park, or our friendly neighborhood satyr was running to join us.

“Hi!” Grover said breathlessly.

He’d accessorized his earlier outfit (minus the Crocs) with a massive rucksack over one shoulder, a walking stick, and a Day-Glo orange cap stitched with little dancing satyrs. I would have thought he was going on a camping trip, but since Grover lives in nature, I guess this was how he geared up for a week in the city, exploring the Great Indoors.

“I got bedrolls, a kerosene lantern, snacks—”

“Hold on,” I said. “You picked all that up in Central Park?”

“Rats!” he said.

“Rats.” I glanced at Annabeth for clarification, but she just shrugged.

“It’s great!” Grover promised. “Those guys collect everything. You know, reduce, reuse, recycle ….”

He looked like he was ready to launch into a lecture about the virtues of bartering with rodents. Then his eyes drifted up to the gargoyles on the roof.

“Oh, wow.”

“I know, spooky,” Annabeth agreed.

Grover scratched his goatee. “I was going to say the one on the left looks like my Aunt Helena. But I guess that’s the same thing.” He beamed at us.

“So, we ready for this?”

“No,” I said.

“Yes,” said Annabeth.

We followed the cranium-brick road to the front porch. Being under the wrought-iron latticework made me feel like I'd climbed into a torture cage for me and my closest friends. Maybe that was the effect Hecate's architect had been going for.

The front door was divided into three wooden panels like a folding screen—each glossy black with a silver door knocker in the middle. Each knocker was an animal head—a horse, a lion, a dog—that I associated with Hecate and also with changing my pants.

Annabeth studied the panels. "Maybe it's a test. We have to choose one."

"Or maybe Hecate opens all of them at once," I said, "and sings something in three-part harmony."

Grover shuddered. "You have a dark imagination. How about we knock on all three together?"

"NO!" screamed all the knockers at once.

I'd like to tell you I was surprised, but talking door knockers was not the weirdest scenario I'd envisioned. At least they were small and nailed to the door. They probably couldn't do worse than bite our fingers off.

"One of us always speaks the truth!" said the horse.

"One of us always lies!" said the lion.

I was about to say, *Wait, I know this riddle!*

Then the dog chimed in. "And one of us always says something completely random! RUTABAGA!"

The horse and the lion glanced at the dog.

"Dude," said the horse.

"We've talked about his," said the lion.

“CARBURETOR!” barked the dog.

Even Annabeth seemed at a loss for words. “Um—”

“You must now face our challenge!” cried the horse. “Or else—”

Fortunately, we were saved from *or else*. The door opened on its own, all three panels folding together as the knockers yelled, “Ow! Stop that! POOP

DECK!”

Standing in the doorway was a ginormous hellhound.

Seeing a black Labrador the size of a rhinoceros, with bloodred eyes, a slobbering maw, and daggerlike fangs, my first instinct was to give her a big hug. I couldn’t help it. She looked so much like my old friend Mrs.

O’Leary.

Then I reminded myself that Mrs. O’Leary was an exception among hellhounds. Most of them tolerated demigods only as appetizers.

Grover reacted first, which was probably better than me giving the dog a surprise hug.

“Hi, I’m Grover!” he said. “Um, do we need to finish the door-knocker challenge, or …?”

The hellhound barked with such force it parted my hair down the middle.

“I see.” Grover turned to us and translated. “This is Hecuba. She says to ignore the door knockers. They haven’t worked properly since the school closed down.”

Annabeth frowned. “School?”

“I think that’s what she said.” Grover paused. “Although that particular kind of bark can mean a lot of things. School. Kennel. Pee spot.”

I was glad I hadn't had to learn animal-speak for my school's foreign-language requirement. I'd barely been able to master numbers and colors in Spanish, even with my friend Leo Valdez as a tutor.

"WOOOF!" Hecuba barked again, her eyes fixed on me.

Grover looked troubled. "Uh, I don't think so …." He faced me. "You're not salmon-flavored, are you? She says you smell like you're salmon-flavored."

Annabeth covered her mouth, trying not to laugh.

I added one more thing to my mental list of stuff to thank my dad for.

Apparently, I smelled like Purina Catch o' the Day to hellhounds. I wondered if I should reevaluate why Mrs. O'Leary liked me so much.

"No, I'm just Percy," I told the dog. "That's my name. Not my flavor."

"Also kind of your flavor," Annabeth added. Then to the dog: "I'm Annabeth. Hecate asked us to watch you for the week?"

Hecuba tilted her head, the way dogs do when they hear *walk* or *treat* or *son of Poseidon for dinner*. She barked a third time, and I realized her breath did in fact smell like salmon. I wondered if it was from the last demigod Hecate had invited over.

"Great, thanks!" Grover said. "She says *C'mon in*."

We followed the hellhound inside, leaving behind the muffled cries of the door knockers. "Wait! We work fine! PORK RINDS!"

Inside, a black marble foyer opened into a great room that reminded me of a medieval church. Not that I'd ever been in a medieval church, but I saw *Spamalot* once, so I felt like an expert.

Carved wooden beams held up the peaked ceiling, which was painted black and speckled with silver constellations. Stained-glass windows lined the

walls on either side, despite the fact that the townhouse was wedged up against other townhouses, so there shouldn't have *been* any side windows.

In the corners of the room, more stone gargoyles squatted on columns.

Hanging from the central rafter was a massive candelabra—an iron wheel with lit candles that looked like it would really hurt when it eventually landed on me. (I've found that the more something could potentially hurt, the more likely it is to happen, and no, I'm not going to dwell on how depressing that is.)

Persian rugs covered the gray stone floor, all embroidered with scenes of tortured spirits. Four straight-backed mahogany benches faced the far end of the room, where a dais was set up with a lectern and a grand piano.

Above that, affixed to the railing of a wraparound staircase, was a crossed pair of unlit torches.

It was the kind of room a god would design: grandiose, impractical, and uncomfortable, like Hecate had thought, *This is probably how humans live*,

right? Sure! I couldn't imagine spending four nights here without developing an anxiety disorder. Unfortunately, that was my quest. Bummer.

The hellhound padded over to the dais and barked.

A smaller animal, who'd been curled up asleep on the lectern, lifted its head. Judging from its noodlelike body, triangular face, and the mask of black fur around its beady eyes, I guessed it was a polecat.

It yawned, stretched, and then farted with a sound like air being pinched from a balloon.

"Hi!" Grover strolled up to the varmint with a total disregard for toxic fumes. "I'm Grover. How do you do?"

I wouldn't have offered my hand to the polecat. It had pointy teeth.

Nevertheless, the polecat stood on its high legs and extended one dainty paw, shaking politely with Grover. Then it farted again, because etiquette.

“Gale?” Grover asked. (I seriously hoped he wasn’t translating the polecat’s flatulence.) “That’s a lovely name. These are my friends, Annabeth and Percy.”

Before I could say anything like *Hello* or *What in the gods’ names have you been eating?* the smell hit me. My eyes watered. If I was going to spend a school week with Gale, I’d need to go shopping for deodorizers. Maybe I could tie a new-car-scented air freshener to her tail.

Then from above us, a voice called, “Ah, there you are!”

Standing on the balcony at the top of the staircase was the goddess Hecate.

To answer your burning question— *What do gods wear at home?* —I can now confirm: yoga pants and an oversize sleep shirt. Hecate’s hair was tied back in a loose bun, and her face and shirt were covered with dark smudges, like my mom when she’s been cleaning the oven. (Sorry, Mom.) She definitely did not look ready for visitors.

“Are we early?” I asked. “We can come back—”

“No, no!” Hecate gave me a smile that was about as warm and welcoming as her decor. “You’re just in time. I can give you the three-drachma tour of the house.”

“Cool!” Grover said.

Hecate stared at us expectantly.

I wondered if I was supposed to bow, or offer my hand, or fart with gusto.

“Oh,” Annabeth said at last. “You’re not joking about the three drachmas.”

The goddess’s eyes glinted. “I never joke about drachmas, my dear.”

Annabeth fished around in her pockets. She came up with three golden coins. As usual, I was grateful she was so prepared. Otherwise, I would've had to get into the whole awkward conversation about whether Hecate took IOUs.

"Just put them on the piano," Hecate said.

Once Annabeth had made her offering, Hecate's smile warmed just a bit.

"Right, then. Come on up! The eels won't feed themselves!"

F I V E

We Enter the Laboratory of Forbidden Ice Cream

Yes, eels.

In Hecate's second-floor hallway, she kept a massive freestanding glass column of salt water filled with morays because, she told us, their toxic mucus was good for potions. That was more information than I needed to know.

Four long yellow monsters glided through the tank, wriggling around coral and fixing me with their soulless blue eyes. Hecate showed us how to feed them from a nearby freezer full of dead fish, but she needn't have bothered. The eels were telling me all about it telepathically. Their thoughts chiseled their way into my skull like ice picks.

She feeds us six times a day, said the one who thought of himself as Larry.

"Only feed them once a day," Hecate said.

We get twenty fish each, said another eel, Fortunato.

"One fish each," Hecate instructed.

And the polecat looks tasty, too, said the eel called Bigwig. *We can eat the polecat.*

"We'll figure it out," I told the goddess. "I get along great with sea creatures."

Feed us all the things, warned the fourth eel, Janet. *Or we will bite you.*

We were off to a great start.

A half dozen side corridors branched off from Eel Hall, each lined with black lacquered doors stenciled with creepy Art Deco skeletons. Art Creepo?

"These are bedrooms," Hecate said, gesturing down one of the corridors.

"But they are only for the lucky acolytes I train in magic."

Annabeth looked interested. “Do you do that often?”

“I haven’t for many years.” Hecate sighed. “Once, this mansion was a school for magic—”

“Weird concept,” I muttered, because sometimes I blurt stuff out that should not be blurted. It was just that I was having trouble imagining students running around the house, zapping one another with wands and making potions out of eel mucus.

Before Hecate could smite me, Annabeth jumped in. “Hecuba mentioned that the school closed. Why was that?”

Hecate gave the hellhound a withering look. “We don’t talk about the school if we want to remain a happy family.”

The dog tucked her tail between her legs. On Hecate’s shoulder, the polecat chittered, probably teasing the hellhound.

Grover cleared his throat. “So where do we sleep, then?” He sounded vaguely worried, since sleep is one of his favorite things.

Hecate hesitated. If I were a betting man, I’d guess that the question of our sleeping arrangements hadn’t occurred to her.

“You may … camp in the living room,” she offered.

“Awesome!” Grover grinned triumphantly. “Glad I brought extra bedrolls!”

I imagined myself sleeping under the iron candelabra, waiting for it to fall and cut me into the shape of a sugar cookie. Or maybe I’d stretch out on the grand piano next to Gale the farting polecat. There were so many options.

“What about bathrooms?” I asked.

Hecate frowned. Another mortal necessity she probably hadn’t thought about in years: the need to flush. She gestured vaguely down another corridor. “You will find rooms with … baths … down there.”

“You just created new ones, didn’t you?” I asked.

“No!” she snapped. “Now, down here you will find the library ….”

“Also off-limits?” I guessed.

Hecate arched her eyebrows. “I don’t limit access to books, Percy Jackson. I’m not a monster. If you think you can navigate the knowledge in my library, be my guest. But if that knowledge turns you into a flaming purple armadillo, don’t come crying to me later.”

I made a note of which hallway she was indicating. I didn’t want to stumble around at night, looking for a toilet, and find myself in a room full of hazardous magical textbooks. Plus, the warning about the armadillo sounded oddly specific, like it had happened before.

Annabeth, however, had a gleam in her eyes. To her, knowledge was irresistible. Even the flaming purple kind, which kind of troubled me.

Grover raised his hand. “And is there a kitchen …?” He pointed to Annabeth’s bag of Mexican food. “Our tacos and enchiladas are probably getting cold.”

He sounded definitely worried now. He liked eating even more than sleeping. He *really* liked enchiladas, which he said were so important they deserved a separate category from “food.”

Hecate scoffed. “Of course I have a kitchen, although we call it the laboratory. It’s in the basement. Follow me.”

She led us down a different stairwell. How many were there? I got the sense that the house was way bigger than it ought to be—as if the inside, like the outside, blurred and blended into the surrounding buildings. I hoped I didn’t wander into a neighbor’s house by accident and surprise them in the shower.

The hellhound Hecuba padded behind us, still looking morose from her mom’s scolding. She left a trail of drool, which I suspected would make it

easy to track her comings and goings.

The polecat Gale was still perched on Hecate's shoulder. She had a talent for waiting until I was directly behind her before ripping a stinker.

The basement turned out to be the brightest and most spacious area of the house. The white stone floor gleamed like ice milk. Windows let in bright light through frosted glass, which was weird since the sun had already started going down. Maybe each bank of windows existed in a different time zone, at just the right time of day to capture the perfect light.

In the center of the room stood a line of stainless steel workstations that reminded me of morgue tables. Along the walls were enough white granite counters, mixing bowls, blenders, cutting boards, ovens, and range tops to keep an army of chefs busy. Displayed in glass-doored cabinets were hundreds of jars, vials, and beakers filled with colorful liquids. Gooey objects floated in some of them, and I really did not want to know what they were. On the nearest stove, several covered pots simmered and steamed.

Hecate spread her arms proudly. "I know what you are thinking: This looks like the set of *The Great Witches' Brew Off*. And you're right. We filmed all seven seasons here."

"Oh!" Grover said. "I *loved* the episode with the growth elixirs! When Alejandro turned into a Hyperborean giant—?"

"A classic," Hecate agreed. "Season three, episode five."

I glanced at Annabeth, who looked as mystified as I was. Maybe we could find the show on Hecate's TV and binge it this week. She probably had a subscription to Olympus+ or whatever the gods were watching these days.

Grover sniffed the air. "What is that heavenly smell?"

He followed his nose—past the simmering pots that did *not* smell heavenly—to the farthest counter, where an old-fashioned ice cream maker rumbled

away: a silver canister churning in a wooden bucket filled with crushed ice. I hadn't seen one of those in years.

Whatever was inside smelled of fresh strawberries ripening in the summer sun, just like the fields at Camp Half-Blood. A drop of pink liquid trickled from the canister's rim, and Grover was shaking as he tried to restrain himself. The aroma was so powerful even *I* wanted to dip my finger in it and have a taste.

"You will touch *none* of my projects," Hecate warned. "They must all be allowed to simmer on the stove just as they are until I return. I will make an exception, however, for this strawberry milkshake experiment."

Grover's eyes widened. "You will?"

"Tomorrow at precisely ten a.m., it will be the proper consistency. I will allow you to unplug the motor, take the canister out of the ice *using safety gloves*, and transfer it to the freezer over there. That is *all* you may do.

Absolutely *no* taste-testing, or there will be dire consequences. Do you understand?"

Grover looked like he was trying to swallow a golf-ball-size lump of disappointment. He nodded glumly.

"Good," Hecate said. "Otherwise, you may use the kitchen to prepare food as you wish. Now, enough about your mortal needs. Let me show you how to properly care for my pets!"

S I X

Raw Chicken Carcasses and Where to Find Them

Hecate liked rules.

She had rules about feeding the pets, rules about walking them, rules about grooming them, and rules about how to follow the rules about the rules.

“These are Hecuba’s vitamins,” she said, standing in front of a cabinet lined with mason jars, each filled with what looked like chicken nuggets in various colors—gray, gold, green, blue, and pink-and-white polka-dotted.

“She gets two each morning out of each jar.”

“Each jar?” I asked.

It looked like too many vitamins, even for a hellhound-size stomach.

“Very important for her joints and fur,” Hecate insisted. “She doesn’t like them, but don’t let her refuse.”

Over in the corner of the den, Hecuba curled up on her doggie bed, which was the size of a bouncy house, put her face on her paws, and sighed heavily. I didn’t blame her. I was imagining how much time and work it would take every morning to coax her into eating forty Medicinal McNuggets.

“She can have two cups of kibble for breakfast and dinner,” Hecate continued. “No treats while I’m gone, or she’ll think she can take advantage of you.”

What she called *kibble* looked to me like a trash can full of rocks. The measuring scoop had been fashioned from a gallon milk jug. The kibble smoked like dry ice and gave off an odor like hot asphalt.

“Yum,” I said.

“She loves it,” Hecate insisted, then turned to her hellhound. “Don’t you, pwetty girl?”

Hecuba’s big bloodshot eyes seemed to send the message *I hate my life*.

“That’s my pwetty girl,” Hecate cooed. “Now, she gets walks twice a day, morning and evening. In here, you’ll find her supplies.”

She opened a closet door, revealing a box of extra-hefty forty-gallon garden-waste bags that had been relabeled POOP BAGS FOR HECUBA. Hanging on the wall was an assortment of gigantic leashes—one pink, one yellow, one with daisies, and one with Hello Kitty designs.

“Just don’t take her any farther than Pennsylvania,” Hecate advised.

“Pennsylvania?” Grover asked.

Hecate turned to Annabeth. “Are your friends a bit slow, or do they just have bad hearing?”

Annabeth kept a straight face. “They’re fine. Just a little in awe. You are a goddess, after all.”

Hecate looked satisfied with that answer. “Well … I’m glad they have a sensible young woman to direct them, then. If I still had my school …” She hesitated, then sighed. “Never mind. It’s very important that the animals *not* be allowed outside without their leashes. The accessories are ensorcelled to make sure my little troublemakers can’t escape them and go romping off on their own. If one of you were to open the door and let them out—”

“We won’t,” I promised, because I was not in the mood to see another demonstration of Hecate’s fiery three-headed death threats. I also didn’t want to be ensorcelled. That sounded painful.

“Good!” Hecate said cheerily. “Now let’s talk about Gale.”

I wasn’t ready for that conversation … not once I saw the raw chicken.

Gale had her own polecat playroom. The place was a forest of carpeted columns riddled with polecat-size holes so Gale had plenty of places to scamper, hide, and fart. A thick bed of cedar shavings on the floor partially covered up the aroma of intestinal distress, but it still smelled like Gale had made herself right at home. Along the back wall stood a row of combat dummies—the kind you’d see in a self-defense class, with pedestal bases, padded upper bodies, and rubber heads with crew cuts. The polecat had been hard at work attacking these. I could tell from the chewed-off noses, the ripped-open guts, and the claw marks where the dummies’ groins would have been.

All that I could have dealt with. A polecat has to have her fun. But I almost lost it when Hecate showed us Gale’s food supply.

The red-enameled refrigerator opened to reveal a row of chicken carcasses hanging on meat hooks. As soon as Gale saw them, she jumped from

Hecate's shoulder and began chittering excitedly, running circles around Hecate's feet.

"Silly girl." The goddess chuckled. "Wait for me to set it up."

Hecate removed a chicken carcass from the refrigerator and walked over to a large meat hook hanging by a chain from the ceiling. She impaled the chicken and let it swing.

Horror set in as I realized that the polecat was supposed to leap onto it

…. But it was six feet in the air. No way could Gale …

The polecat leaped up like a fuzzy rocket and sank her fangs into the chicken's left thigh. She clawed her way onto the swinging poultry, then disappeared inside its, er, cavity. Growling, shredding, and slurping sounds issued from the chicken's chest. Then, with a terrible *r-r-rip*, Gale's head punched through the chicken's rib cage. Her eyes gleamed with pleasure.

Her teeth were bloody, her fur coated with chicken flesh and fat.

"Oh," Grover said in a weak falsetto. "I was hoping she ate mouse-flavored biscuits or something, but, um …"

But instead, we got the monster from *Alien*.

Even Annabeth looked a little freaked out, and she was the least freak-out-able of the three of us.

"Uh …" she said, which sounded like a noise you might make right before your lunch comes up. "How often does she do this?"

"Breakfast and dinner," said Hecate with a pleased-mother smile. "She doesn't eat the whole thing, obviously."

I looked at the polecat, who had dived back into the carcass and was making it shake as flesh and fat dribbled out the bottom. "Wow."

Hecate frowned at me. “The best part of a meal is playing with your food, Percy Jackson. Surely you know this.”

I thought about when I used to make castles with mashed potatoes and peas when I was a little dude. Then I thought about all the monsters who had toyed with me before trying to eat me for dinner.

“True,” I said. “So we let her chew on it for a while, and then …”

Gale dropped from the chicken, chittered at me a few times just to show off her fangs, then started grooming herself like a cat. I suddenly understood why her coat looked so glossy—a good conditioning with chicken fat.

“Then you clean up!” Hecate snapped her fingers, causing the carcass to dissolve in a burst of dust. “Easy!” I noted that she’d left gross little bits of food on the floor for us to take care of.

Grover tried to snap his fingers. It was a trick he’d never really mastered.

Even if he could have, I suspected he wouldn’t have been able to magic away dead chickens. We were in for some fun work with Gale’s leftovers.

“Now,” Hecate said, “it’s important that you use the proper terminology when talking about Gale. She gets *very* upset if you call her any other type of mustelid. Whatever you do, never call her a weasel.”

Gale jumped and squeaked as if someone had stuck a pin in her butt. Her eyes turned bright red. Steam came out of her ears. I was fairly certain most polecats did not do this.

“Of—of course,” Grover stammered. “Everyone knows polecats are much larger than weasels. Also, polecats have a black mask of fur that extends all the way to their nose!”

“Everyone knows that,” I agreed.

“She’s also not a ferret,” Hecate said. “Or a mink. Or a vole. And definitely not a skunk.”

Gale hissed in outrage.

“Nice polecat,” Annabeth said. “Definitely a polecat.”

Gale sniffed indignantly, then started playing with her nearest combat dummy. And when I say *playing*, I mean she leaped on its head and began to chew a hole in its face.

“Adorable,” I said.

“I know.” Hecate sighed contentedly. “I hate to leave them, even for a few days! But I trust they will be in good hands.” She looked at me, frowned, then gazed at Annabeth a bit more hopefully. “Gale’s harness is on the wall over there. She can go with you when you take Hecuba for walks.”

The harness was black leather with stainless steel spikes. Because Gale was metal.

Hecate showed us a few other highlights of the polecat cave: the cardboard box where Gale liked to sleep, next to the expensive polecat habitat that had come in the box but Gale wouldn’t even look at. There was a pallet of extra cedar shavings to spread on the floor as needed, a pooper-scooper, a grooming kit, and a polecat toothbrush with special bunny-flavored toothpaste.

Finally, Hecate led us back to the great room.

“What else …?” she mused. “Ah, yes, my symbols of power!”

She pointed to the crossed set of torches hanging from the balcony railing. “I am leaving you this set, but they should be used only in the event

of an *extreme* emergency. Is that clear?”

It was absolutely not clear. What were we supposed to do with a couple of torches? Did it count as an emergency if a Hyperborean giant came by and asked us for a light?

Since Hecate already thought I was an idiot, I figured the safest thing to do was nod. “Got it.”

“Good …” Hecate glanced at the stained-glass windows, which were darkening with the sunset. “I must be off. Tokyo Disneyland will be opening soon, and they’re holding a Spooky Boo! parade in my honor. Any questions? No? Good!”

She snapped her fingers once more. Her nightshirt and yoga pants transformed into an elaborate black evening gown, with black silk gloves, a diamond necklace, and a golden tiara in her thick black hair. She looked like Dark Cinderella, ready to torture her wicked stepsisters, the prince, and the fairy godmother for not getting her a better carriage.

“The house keys are hanging by the front door on a keychain with little crossed torches,” she said. “Always lock up when you leave. I will see you at midnight on Friday. If all is in order, you will have your recommendation letter, Percy Jackson. If all is *not* in order …”

“I won’t need the recommendation letter,” I guessed. “Because I won’t have a future.”

She patted me on the cheek with her silk glove. “I knew you were smarter than you looked. Ta-ta!”

The goddess disappeared in a swirl of black soot.

I looked at Annabeth and Grover. I tried to think of something encouraging to say. Then I noticed Hecuba and Gale staring at us from the doorways of their respective rooms. Their eyes gleamed. They both grinned, baring their teeth as if thinking, *Mom is gone. Now the fun begins.*

S E V E N

I Go Dog-Skiing

The “fun” started with cleanup from the kibble-and-chicken massacre. We did the best we could, though I wished we had hazmat suits and maybe a fire hose.

By the time I staggered back into the great room, I wasn’t much in the mood for my own dinner. That was just as well. Hecuba and Gale had another idea. They were both standing by the front door, holding their leashes in their mouths.

“Fine,” I told them. “But we’re not going all the way to Pennsylvania.

Annabeth and I have school tomorrow."

I expected the animals to pout. Instead, they went bonkers with excitement. Gale chittered and ran in circles, dragging her heavy-metal harness behind her. If there had been a chicken carcass in the room, I imagine she would have eviscerated it out of sheer joy.

Hecuba stood on her hind paws like she was feeling the Holy Spirit at a Sunday revival. Then she went into a play bow and barked with such force it rattled the candelabra.

Annabeth helped me get Hecuba's collar on her. No matter the dog, Annabeth loved all of them—the bigger and scarier the better. When it came to my own hellhound buddy, Mrs. O'Leary, I found this heartwarming. When Annabeth acted so casual around Hecuba, it was just worrying.

Grover spent a few minutes sweet-talking Gale, trying to calm her so he could put on her harness. "That's a good polecat! So much prettier than a skunk or a vole! Such a lovely mustelid!"

Gale farted, which I guess was a sign they were bonding.

At last, we had both animals on their leashes. Annabeth held Hecuba's, which had a bar handle on the end like a waterskiing rope. Grover took charge of Gale, who wrapped up his legs like a mummy as she raced around his hooves, ready to rock and roll.

"Good to go?" I asked once Grover had disentangled himself.

"Good to go," Annabeth agreed.

We were definitely *not* good to go. As soon as I opened the front door, Hecuba tore down the sidewalk, dragging Annabeth behind her. Gale did her best to keep up, forcing Grover into a brisk jog.

I started to bolt after them. Then the door knockers yelled, "Lock the door! No, leave the door open! CRÊPES SUZETTE!"

I raced back inside, grabbed the keys, then locked up and ran after my friends, who were now disappearing up Lexington Avenue.

The only things that saved Annabeth from being dragged to death were her own fast feet and the fact that Hecuba was a sprinter, not a marathoner.

The oversize Labrador would race a block, stop to smell a trash can, race another block, look back to see if Annabeth had been killed in traffic, sniff another trash can, and so on. Because life is short. You have to take time to stop and smell the trash cans.

I caught up with them at 30th and Lex, nine blocks north of the manse. By this point, Gale was taking a break on board the Satyr Express. She was cheerfully perched on Grover's head, gnawing on his left horn while he tried to coax her down without much luck. I wondered if mortal passersby saw the polecat, or if they thought Grover was just talking to himself and having a really bad hair day. Annabeth's braids had come undone, like she'd just been through a wind tunnel. She had new stains on her shirt, new rips in her jeans, and a skinned left knee.

"My turn?" I gestured to the leash.

She handed it over.

"Running shoes," she gasped, nodding toward her flats. "Tomorrow, I bring running shoes."

"WOOOF!" Hecuba must have liked the word *running*. I had just enough time to grab the ski handle before she yanked me into a full-out sprint.

By the time we got to East 80th, I was sweating, out of breath, and in total agreement with Annabeth about running shoes.

While Hecuba deposited a Niagara Falls of pee on a manhole cover in the middle of the street, Grover trotted up to me, his polecat friend chattering happily on top of his head. "Doing okay?" he asked me.

I wanted to comment that not all of us had goat hooves for running, but I didn't have enough air in my lungs. I just gave him a thumbs-up. Then Hecuba took off again.

As my muscles turned to putty, my mind started to wander. I realized that I'd never actually *walked* Mrs. O'Leary. We'd played together and romped around, but whenever we needed to travel, we did so through her shadow-teleportation power, which made her a very handy friend. I wondered if Hecuba could do that, or if Hecate had taken away her power with a shadow-ectomy.

What would Mrs. O'Leary think of Hecuba? Something told me they would *not* have a meet-cute. With Mrs. O'Leary, I'd never doubted she had the soul of a dog—an ancient giant supernatural dog from the Underworld, but still a dog.

With Hecuba … well, I tried not to look in her eyes for too long. When I did, I saw something worrisome—the echo of a human personality. My friend Hazel had told me that Gale and Hecuba were both human once, back in ancient times. I couldn't recall the details, but it was clear that even after thousands of years, Hecuba still had plots and schemes swirling around in her brain. I didn't know how to deal with that knowledge other than to hold on tighter to her leash and hope she didn't decide to assassinate me by running in front of the 101 bus.

Around 95th Street, the polecat finally took mercy on us. Gale chittered and squeaked, pointing south with her nose. Hecuba huffed, irritated, but she seemed to agree that maybe it was time to go home.

"You want to take her?" I asked Annabeth.

"No, you're doing great!" She'd taken her shoes off a few blocks before.

Normally this wasn't recommended when walking in Manhattan, but she'd developed some nasty-looking blisters on her feet, so I decided not to complain as Hecuba towed me back down Lexington.

By the time we reached Gramercy Park, I felt like I'd been holding the weight of the sky on my shoulders. I don't mean that figuratively—I've done it. So has Annabeth. It's the worst. I wouldn't have been surprised if my hair got a gray streak again, like it did when I took on Atlas's job. I wondered if that often happened to Greek demigods, and if they had to dye their hair back afterward. Maybe that's why there's a hair dye called Grecian Formula ….

I might have been getting delirious from oxygen deprivation ….

In fact, at the corner of Gramercy Park West, I had a hallucination. At the other end of the block, in the shadows between the streetlamps, I thought I

saw a glowing blue apparition—the figure of a child on a bicycle, pedaling away from us in terror. When I blinked, it was gone.

I took another step. Something *crunched* under my shoe. I looked down.

A child-size pair of eyeglasses lay broken on the pavement …. Then they too vanished into mist.

"You okay?" asked Annabeth.

"Did you see that?"

"What?"

I wasn't sure how to answer. "Hecate's the goddess of ghosts, right?"

Annabeth frowned. "You think you saw one?"

"I'm not sure …."

"Guys, come on!" Grover called from up ahead, blissfully unconcerned.

"It's finally time for *our* dinner!"

I unlocked the front door, trying to ignore the knockers that were threatening to hex us if we didn't play their guessing game. We wrestled the

animals out of their leashes, then headed to the basement kitchen to make our meal: some greens and trail mix Grover had brought, along with Annabeth's bug-licious bounty from the Black Ant.

As I was trying to find the microwave to reheat the Mexican food, I noticed Grover hovering near Hecate's ice cream machine.

"Remember, no touchy," I warned him.

"Of course not!" He sounded offended, maybe because he'd been thinking about doing exactly that. "Not until ten a.m. tomorrow morning, with safety gloves, blah, blah, blah. I think I found the microwave. Oh, wait, it says Easy Curse Oven. Never mind."

Once our food was reheated, we made camp in the great room. Grover's bedrolls were surprisingly comfortable, only slightly nibbled by rats, and they didn't smell like rodents at all—more like pine needles and wild mint.

In the dim candlelight, I could almost believe the silver flecks on the ceiling really were constellations in a dark rural sky.

If only we'd had a campfire … but I imagined that would've been against city codes. I wondered if Hecate had smoke detectors. If they went off, would they summon the FDNY or some godly brigade of hosers? That sounded like a good job for children of Poseidon. Maybe it was another career path I could look into if college didn't work out.

Hecuba and Gale didn't go to their rooms and fall right to sleep like good pets. Instead they sat at the edge of our imaginary campfire and watched us

as if they'd never seen humans have dinner before. Hecuba's sorrowful eyes followed every bit of food that went into my mouth. I was tempted to throw her my grasshopper tlayudas, but Hecate had said no treats. So I just picked at my plate, making *nom-nom* sounds and relying on the dim light to hide the fact that I was avoiding the bug meat.

"This is nice," Annabeth said after she'd finished her meal.

“I admire your positivity,” I said.

She nudged my knee. “Ah, c’mon, Seaweed Brain. It’s not so bad. As far as quests go, this is luxury! We have heat and running water. Speaking of which, I’m going to go find a shower ….”

She got up to do that while Grover and I cleared the dishes.

When Annabeth came back, her hair was wrapped in a towel. She’d changed into gray flannel owl-patterned pj’s. Her blistered feet were bandaged, and she had a strange smirk on her face. “You guys need to see the bathrooms.”

Trailed by Hecuba and Gale, we went upstairs to check out the wondrous facilities. Apparently, I’d been right about Hecate magicking them into existence the moment I asked. Not being a plumber, or a human, the goddess hadn’t remembered how bath fixtures worked, so she’d created a variety of rooms, none of which made much sense. In the first bathroom we visited, the shower worked normally, but the toilet was on the ceiling, the water staying in the bowl in defiance of gravity.

“What happens if you flush it?” I wondered.

Annabeth laughed. “Percy, I’ve seen what happens when you mess with plumbing. If you want to try that, wait until I’m out of the room.”

She put a sticky note on the bathroom door: SHOWER OKAY, just to mark which one we could use. Then she led us to her next discovery. This bathroom was lined in black leather with spiky chrome fixtures.

Gale chittered in approval.

Grover grunted. “You’re right. *Metal*.”

The shower came in one temperature: ice-cold. The towels were chain mail.

“No thanks,” I decided. “What about the—”

“Careful,” Annabeth warned. She used a plunger to open the toilet lid.

Steam billowed out. The water in the bowl bubbled like a stewpot.

“It’s a *boilet*,” I said.

I grinned, pleased with myself. Hecuba growled. Apparently, she didn’t appreciate my humor. Annabeth often told me I would make a great dad, because I already had the right jokes—stupid, corny, and stupid.

We spent a few more minutes exploring the wonders of Hecate’s bathrooms. We managed to locate three working toilets that would not kill us and two working showers, along with a bathtub that was a working koi pond. Grover assured us that would suffice for him as long as the fish didn’t mind.

Once we’d all gotten ready for bed, we gathered again in the great room.

The polecat and the hellhound cuddled next to the grand piano, which was almost cute if you could ignore the way Hecuba bared her fangs while she slept, and Gale’s gas problems.

“Good first day,” Grover sighed. “Gotta get easier from here, right?”

Three seconds later, he was snoring.

I hoped this might give me some time to talk to Annabeth. I was worried about the strange apparition I’d seen in front of the building—the fleeing child, the broken glasses. I was worried about leaving Grover alone tomorrow with magical strawberry ice cream while we went to school. And I was worried about the hellhound and the polecat chewing my face while I slept.

But Annabeth must’ve been exhausted too. She nestled into her rat-recycled bedroll and was out like a torch.

Me, I stayed up for a while, staring at the speckled constellations on the ceiling. I thought about Grover’s comment—that things had to get easier.

The problem was, in Percy World, things never got easier, only weirder.

E I G H T

Guess What? Weasel Butt

We got up at way too early o'clock, thanks to the hellhound's and polecat's growling stomachs. We fed them breakfast, threw the eels some dead fish, and coaxed Hecuba into swallowing her seven million Vitamin McNuggets. Then we enjoyed the wonders of Hecate's antigravity showers and enchanted toilets before heading to the kitchen, where I got dog hair in my orange juice and a weasel butt in my cereal bowl. (Polecat butt—

whatever.)

Grover suggested a daily walking schedule for the pets. He figured there should always be at least two of us on leash duty. Every morning, he and I

could escort Annabeth down to SODNYC. Then, in the afternoon, he and Annabeth would come meet me with the pets at AHS and we'd walk to the manse together from Astoria. My school was a lot farther away than Annabeth's, but I didn't mind the plan if she didn't. I was just happy to spend extra time with her and Grover, even if it involved being dragged across town by our new fuzzy supernatural overlords.

"Grover, what about you?" Annabeth asked. "That means you're doing *all* the walking."

"Oh, I don't mind. Fresh air!"

You don't see *fresh air* on a lot of Tripadvisor reviews for Manhattan, but I appreciated Grover's enthusiasm.

We packed our stuff for school, got the pets geared up in their heavy-metal and Hello Kitty accoutrements, then headed out to escort Annabeth to SODNYC. As we locked up, the door knockers told us: 1) to have a great day, 2) we would die in agony, and 3) PORK BELLIES! Honestly, I'd had stranger multiple-choice tests.

We were more prepared for Hecuba's and Gale's walking habits this time, so we weren't surprised when Hecuba led us on a series of high-speed, high-terror sprints through traffic, stopping to smell all the things and then pee on them. Annabeth had even found a pair of sneakers in one of Hecate's closets, which seemed to help. I just hoped the shoes didn't end up being

cursed. I didn't want Annabeth to accidentally float to the moon or bust out in a fit of Irish line dancing.

As for Gale, we found out she had a strange affinity for drugstores. Every time we passed one, the polecat tried to tug Grover inside. Maybe she realized she needed some anti-gas medicine in the worst way. Or maybe Duane Reade was having a sale on chicken carcasses.

By the time we reached SODNYC, I was feeling almost optimistic about our chances of surviving through Halloween. We were laughing and having fun, which I'll take any Tuesday morning of a school week.

It felt good. Almost *domestic*. Just three besties and their magical rent-a-pets enjoying life. I didn't say anything, because that would jinx it, but we could totally make it to Friday night … right?

"Have a good day at school, dear," I told Annabeth.

"Thanks, Mom!" She gave me a big wet kiss.

"You guys and your public displays of affection," Grover grumbled.

On cue, Annabeth and I got on either side of him, wrapped him in a hug, and kissed him on either cheek with a big *Mmm-whah!*

"Much better," he muttered, blushing hard.

"See you this afternoon," Annabeth told us, handing me Hecuba's leash. I wished her borrowed sneakers could magically grow bigger to fit me, but no such luck. Then she was off.

Grover and I headed back toward the manse. We had some trouble on Third Avenue when Hecuba decided to attack a Lil Zeus Greek food cart, but I managed to pull her off before she killed the cook or devoured his meat supply. Dude wasn't too happy. He yelled something in Greek at me—

maybe *Please control your rhinoceros*—but I couldn't be too mad at Hecuba. For one thing, the food smelled good. For another, anything labeled *Zeus* sent me into attack mode, too.

Back at Gramercy Park, I realized I had about twenty minutes to make the forty-minute trip to school. Fortunately, my first-period teacher was pretty lax about attendance.

"You sure you'll be okay?" I asked Grover at the front door once the pets were safely back inside.

"Oh, yeah!" His eye twitched. "I got a ton to do. Going to send out the party invitations for Friday, play with the animals, maybe bake a cake.

We'll pick you up at AHS. Then we can have a nice walk home over the Queensboro Bridge!"

"Okay," I said. "Don't forget to put the ice cream potion stuff in the—"

"Freezer, I know! I'll be fine, 'kay? Thanks, bye!"

He closed the door.

"He'll do well!" one of the door knockers assured me.

"He'll ruin everything!" said another.

"RAINFOREST CAFÉ!" said the third.

Hmm … probably nothing to worry about. It wasn't until I got to the subway that I realized I wasn't sure which door knocker had said that Grover would ruin everything—the truth-teller or the liar. I tried to put it out of my mind. Grover was smart. He was responsible. He'd been my protector for years, and we'd both grown wiser over that time. I knew I could trust him to do the right thing.

I made it to school late enough for the secretary to give me a disappointed sigh, but not late enough to get a full scolding. I considered that a win.

On the way to class, I saw my counselor, Eudora, again. She was creeping down the hall on tiptoe. When she spotted me, she froze like a polecat in headlights.

"Is she gone?" she stage-whispered.

"Um … you mean Hecate?"

"She can't see me!" She dove into the nearest room and locked the door behind her. I waited to see if she would come back out, since she'd just shut herself in the janitor's closet. She didn't. I was already late, so I decided to keep going. At some point, though, I was going to have to find out why the Nereid was so terrified of Hecate. I mean, aside from the obvious reason that the goddess was terrifying.

My classes went okay. I hadn't done my homework, but that wasn't unusual.

Back in August, my stepdad Paul had tried to help me organize my schoolwork when he saw that it was way too much for me to keep straight on my own. He suggested I think of homework as triage. "Look at your assignments like they're wounded patients," he'd said, "and handle them in order of severity. 'Okay, you need immediate attention, or you'll die. You can wait a bit. You aren't that bad—go home, take some aspirin, and call me tomorrow.'"

I gave my homework a lot of aspirin.

Paul's system worked most of the time. I could usually tell which projects were important and which ones my teachers had only assigned because they felt they had to and they didn't want to grade any more than I wanted to do them. Having a teacher in the family can be handy.

I was feeling pretty good by the end of the school day. I hadn't failed any quizzes. I hadn't fallen asleep. Miraculously, my history teacher said, "Very good, Mr. Jackson," when I answered a question, which was probably a sign she was actually a monster, but I wasn't going to judge unless she attacked me. Some of my best friends are monsters.

After swim practice I waited in front of AHS, my hair still smelling of chlorine. I was looking forward to seeing my friends, even Hecuba and Gale.

That's the weird thing about pets, I guess. Even when they're a total pain, they still manage to burrow their way into your heart. I kept looking down 37th Avenue, expecting a huge hellhound to come barreling over the horizon, possibly dragging Annabeth on roller skates.

Twenty minutes passed. For an ADHD guy like me, that translated into about forty Percy hours. Maybe Grover and Annabeth had gotten stuck in a traffic jam … walking across the river to Queens. Maybe the pets had pulled them off course to Hackensack. It could be nothing.

Having no cell phone is something I'd gotten used to. Yes, it sucked not to be able to look things up quickly, scroll through funny videos, or text my friends to see where they were. But none of my friends could have cell phones either, so it didn't matter much. Plus, watching cats ride Roombas or frat dudes failing at backflips is cool, but not worth getting eaten by monsters. Every year or so, I borrowed a mortal's cell phone to see if the magic had worn off or gotten weaker—if maybe I could use a phone now without causing a Great Monster Migration and a Kill Percy Rodeo. Every year, the experiment failed. Once I touched a phone screen, the average time until a monster showed up was thirty-six seconds.

Long story short: I had no way of knowing where Grover and Annabeth were. Iris-messages only worked in certain situations, like I said before, and if the person you're trying to reach is moving—for instance, being dragged across the Tri-State Area by a hellhound—an Iris-message often won't connect.

So I waited. After an hour, I started to panic. If something had happened to Annabeth and Grover and I was just standing here not helping … If

they'd been swallowed by Janet and her gang of moray eels, or if the manse had exploded from a buildup of polecat gas …

I took out Riptide. With the tip of the blade, I etched a message on the sidewalk: *Went to Gramercy*.

That was another trick I'd only learned in the last month. One day when I was bored, sitting on a sidewalk while my mom shopped for clothes for her first author signing, I discovered that Riptide could sketch glowing lines on asphalt that no regular mortals could see. The markings lasted about three hours before fading away—less if it rained. It made me wonder why I'd never seen Celestial bronze graffiti around from other demigods. Maybe they'd never gotten bored enough to try it. Or maybe their weapons didn't have a side hustle as writing utensils.

I began walking back to Manhattan, taking the route I figured Annabeth and Grover would take so I would intercept them if they were still coming my way.

I still hadn’t met them when I got to the Upper East Side. By the time I reached East 60th, I was so concerned I started to jog.

It was still a long way to Gramercy Park, with crosswalk lights that didn’t cooperate and plenty of cars and pedestrians to navigate. I got honked at, cursed at, scowled at, and almost creamed a few times by motorized delivery bikes, but I am a native New Yorker. Such obstacles barely slowed me down.

A block out, I spotted Annabeth running toward the manse from the opposite direction. A chunk of ice formed in my stomach. Apparently, Grover hadn’t come to pick her up, either.

We met in front of the house.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Fine, you?”

“Yeah, but … I guess I lost track of time studying. Grover never showed.

I thought maybe he fell asleep, or …” Her voice faltered when she looked at the mansion. “Oh, gods.”

I was so anxious I had troubling focusing through the Mist.

When the facade of Hecate’s house finally revealed itself, I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. The front windows were all broken, their shattered glass strewn across the garden as if the panes had been busted from within. Several tombstone tiles had fallen off the walls. Blue smoke billowed from the front porch, where the massive three-paneled door had

exploded outward, like someone had hit it with a battering ram from the inside.

“Grover,” we both said at once.

And we ran into the disaster zone.

N I N E

The Apocalypse Smells Like Strawberries Somewhere under the wreckage of the front door, the animal-headed knockers were moaning … in pain? Since they were made of metal, I figured they could wait.

Inside, our campsite was smoldering. The blue smoke was coming from some broken vials that had gotten mixed in with our now-shredded bedrolls.

The benches had been reduced to kindling. The piano was flipped upside down. On the side walls, the stained-glass windows had been smashed, revealing nothing behind them but brick walls. The stairs were littered with heaps of fur and splatters of pink that I really hoped weren't blood.

"An attack?" I wondered aloud.

My heart dragged like an anchor. If we'd left Grover alone and he'd gotten besieged by a Hecate-hating horde of monsters, I would never forgive myself.

"I don't think so." Annabeth's voice quavered as she snuffed out the bedrolls with wet towels. "Those windows, the doors—everything looks like it was busted from the inside."

I knelt by the stairs and picked up a tuft of hair. "This looks like goat fur.

And this pink stuff …"

Annabeth came up next to me. She had a stronger stomach than I did.

She dabbed her finger in the sticky liquid and sniffed it. "Strawberry."

We ran for the kitchen.

The place looked like the set of *The Great Chainsaw Bake Off* season finale. Hecate's bubbling pots had been swept off the stove, splattering magical stew everywhere—painting the cabinets, encrusting the appliances, streaking the ceiling with multicolored chunks and goo. It smelled just as bad as it sounds.

Some of the goo must have been acidic. It steamed as it ate through the floor tiles. The refrigerator looked like someone had taken a wrecking ball to it. The oven door was ripped off its hinges. Vials and beakers from Hecate's cabinets had been disgorged and shattered.

And lying in the middle of all this chaos was a mountain of hairy flesh, snoring with gusto, its two massive shaggy legs propped against the kitchen island, its moose-size hooves pointing toward the ceiling.

I edged backward. "What is that?"

"It's …" Annabeth made a strangled yelp. "Oh, gods, Grover!"

I must have heard her wrong. Grover didn't come in XXXL size. He didn't shake buildings when he snored, and he would never disrespect a kitchen

full of food like this.

But when I stood alongside Fur Mountain, I realized that shreds of Grover's shirt clung to its shoulders. Its body was enormous and almost entirely goatish, but if I squinted and used my imagination, I could almost make out Grover's face—incredibly overinflated, as if he'd had the worst allergic reaction ever.

"Wh-what do we do?" I stammered.

I hoped Annabeth had a plan. Children of Athena always had a plan. But she looked as bewildered as I felt.

"Maybe we should get him to camp," she said. "I've never seen anything like …"

Fur Mountain groaned. His gut rumbled, and though it was ten times louder than usual, I recognized the warning sound.

"Hit the deck!" I ducked and covered as Fur Mountain unleashed the Belch Heard 'Round the World.

A strawberry-scented shock wave rolled across the kitchen, rattling appliances and knocking over the few beakers that hadn't yet been broken.

When I dared to look back up, Grover's body had deflated to near-normal size. His upper half was mostly human again. His face popped back into shape like an anti-dent car hood, but he still seemed to be out cold.

Annabeth staggered to the nearest sink. She filled a cup and threw cold water in Grover's face.

"BLAHHHHHH!" Grover's eyes fluttered open. He tried to sit up, yelped in pain, and lay down again. "My head. Why is everything so bright? Why

—?"

He tented his hands over his mouth. His eyes widened. "Oh, no."

Then he curled into a fetal position and began to cry.

“Hey, man …” I patted his shoulder. I couldn’t tell him everything was okay. Clearly it wasn’t. But I tried my best. “We’re here for you. Do you remember what happened?”

“The milkshake,” he whimpered.

I locked eyes with Annabeth. I’d kind of guessed, given the strawberry scent of this apocalyptic wasteland. Still … I had to fight the urge to yell, *DUDE, YOU HAD ONE JOB!* First, that wasn’t true. We’d left Grover in charge of an entire haunted house, and I’d known in the depths of my worst-case-scenario heart that the milkshake experiment was going to be a problem. Second, Grover already felt terrible enough.

“I didn’t mean to,” he sobbed. “I was moving it to the freezer like I was supposed to. Then the lid popped open, and that aroma … The next thing I knew …”

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” Annabeth said, taking his arm.

“No, the pets!” Grover yelped. “Check the pets!”

Annabeth cursed. I hadn’t thought of the pets either, but with the front doors busted open … Did that count as letting them out? I prayed Grover had left their leashes on so they would still be spellbound to stay in the house.

We left Grover and raced through the mansion, calling out for Gale and Hecuba. Maybe Hecuba was taking a nap. Maybe Gale was attacking her chicken carcasses. But I remembered how grumpy they’d looked when Hecate had talked about their accessories being ensorcelled to keep them inside, and how much they loved their walks.

No luck on the first floor. We bounded upstairs. The second floor seemed to have been spared any damage from Grover’s Goat Hulk rampage, but there was no sign of the pets.

Annabeth ran to check the back rooms.

I stopped at the moray tank. “Where’d they go? The hellhound and the polecat?”

I ate them, said Janet.

“What?!”

She’s kidding, said Fortunato, because I guess moray eels are huge jokers.

As soon as the doors busted open, both ran out. Can we eat them when you bring them back?

“No!”

Can we eat the satyr?

“No!”

I rendezvoused with Annabeth at the entrance to the library.

“Nothing,” she reported.

“The eels say Gale and Hecuba left. They’re in the wild.” I gestured vaguely toward Midtown, which is about as wild as it gets.

Annabeth took a deep breath. I guessed she was counting to ten, trying to find her Athena-Zen-logical-happy-place that would keep her from screaming. “First things first. Let’s check on Grover.”

Back in the kitchen, the satyr was slowly returning to normal. His left horn was still too big, curled like a nautilus shell. His right bicep was the size of a watermelon. He was splattered head to hoof with sticky pink goo, but otherwise he looked like regular old Grover, now with ninety-five percent more strawberry flavor.

“How bad is it?” he asked.

I told him. There was no use sugarcoating it, especially since he was already sugarcoated.

He put his face in his hands and groaned. “I’ve ruined everything. And it’s only Tuesday!”

“We’ll figure it out,” Annabeth said, though she didn’t sound confident.

“Grover, we have to track down the animals. We’re going to need your talents for that. Can you stand?”

This was a smart move—enlisting Grover to help, making him feel like he was part of the solution. Why hadn’t I thought of it? Probably because I was so angry at him. I kept telling myself I shouldn’t blame my best friend for what had happened. I was the one who’d left him alone in the house, after all. Even Annabeth had contributed to the situation, by losing track of time at school. Still, despite these rationalizations, I was shaking with rage.

Annabeth must have seen it.

“Percy, why don’t you go get the leashes,” she said. “We’ll meet you at the front door.”

“Good idea,” I said, and off I went.

My brain was full of static. My hands felt numb. I didn’t realize I’d grabbed Gale’s harness until the spikes started biting into my palm. I snatched up Hecuba’s leash, then headed for the front door.

I remembered Hecate’s triple-headed form in the principal’s office. I’d been threatened by a lot of gods over the years. With Hecate it hit differently—beyond the usual *Obey me now* bluster. Maybe it was because Hecate had power over the Mist. Something about her made me doubt my own sanity. Like perhaps all goddesses were *supposed* to have three

different faces at once. Perhaps toilets *should* be on the ceiling. Perhaps polecats *were* different than weasels.

I felt like if she punished me for wrecking her house and, even worse, losing her beloved pets, I wouldn’t just die. I would be dissolved, rewritten, erased from reality. I would doubt myself right out of existence. She could

control what mortals saw and what they thought. That was basically the same as controlling who they were.

The idea terrified me. It made me want to crawl into the eels' tank and hide. I guess that's why I felt so angry. I couldn't let myself get dissolved into the Mist. And I definitely couldn't let that happen to Grover or Annabeth.

There is nothing wrong with your sight. Hecate's voice whispered in my mind, but I wasn't sure if it was real, or a dream, or a haunted memory.

I stood in the shattered doorway, looking down the cranium-brick path toward Gramercy Park. For a moment, I saw that ghostly blue image on the bicycle again, fleeing as fast as a child could pedal.

There now. That's better. Hecate's laughter echoed through the foyer.

How could she be laughing, I wondered, in the face of all this mess?

Could she not see it?

"Percy?"

Annabeth touched my shoulder and I nearly jumped out of my sneakers.

"Yeah," I said. "Uh, we ready?"

Annabeth pointed toward Grover, who was leaning against the wall, trembling like he had just thrown up.

"I—I can try," he said. "I can—"

His knees buckled. I managed to catch him before he face-planted on the carpet.

"Whoa, okay," I said. "You're not going anywhere, G-man. You need to rest."

"But the first twenty-four hours are critical," he murmured, "in missing-animal cases. We need to … urgh."

He slumped against me, all his energy sapped. He'd gone from being Fur Mountain, Destroyer of Worlds, to a paper satyr who weighed almost nothing in my arms.

"Let's get you sitting down," I said.

Then I remembered that all the furniture in the great room was broken.

Our bedrolls were half-burned from magical chemicals.

Annabeth and I made a nest out of our spare clothes and eased Grover onto the floor.

"I'll be okay in a minute," he said. "I just …"

He keeled over sideways and started to snore.

Annabeth and I stood over him. The house was quiet except for the cries of the buried door knockers and the eels in their tank, singing the Gollum song about fish in four-part harmony.

"Pretty sure Grover will recover," Annabeth ventured.

"You think he's right about the twenty-four-hour thing?" I asked.

She made a listless, one-shoulder shrug. "I don't know. Sounds like something he heard on *Unsolved Murders*. But I do think we need to get out there."

I stared down at Grover—a pitiful, strawberry-frosted lump of unhappiness, whimpering in his sleep. A cold feeling of certainty settled over me—the kind I usually get when I'm about to do something necessary and potentially fatal. I'd been wrong to leave Grover alone before and put him in this position. I needed to fix it.

"You stay with him," I told Annabeth. "I'll track down the pets, starting with Hecuba."

Annabeth frowned. "Won't you need help?"

I tried not to feel like she was doubting my abilities the way *I* was doubting my abilities.

“I’ll have help,” I assured her. “It’s time to use a hellhound to catch a hellhound. I’m calling in Mrs. O’Leary.”

T E N

I Catch a Nope

That sounded real impressive when I said it.

Then I actually had to do it.

Calling Mrs. O’Leary didn’t always work. Sometimes she was too far away to sense me. Sometimes she was busy doing something else, like digging holes in the Underworld or chewing on a juicy drakon bone. Years ago, Daedalus had left her in my care, but these days she was her own person. She did what she wanted.

If I thought about her hard enough, though, she might show up. If that didn’t work, I’d need incentives. I grabbed some treats from Hecuba’s stash.

If *those* failed me, I'd have to go with my last resort. On my keychain, I kept a dog whistle that Leo Valdez had given me. It wasn't made of Stygian ice like my first one—that had shattered. This one was Celestial bronze and engraved with LEO+PERCY 4EVER , because Leo is a doofus. I tried not to blow that whistle unless I really had to.

The second thing I would need: lots of open space. Mrs. O'Leary usually got excited when she saw me. We didn't need to wreck the mansion any more than we already had. I grabbed Hecate's keys, walked across the street, and unlocked one of the gates to Gramercy Park.

I expected a chorus of billionaire angels to start singing when I opened it, but the only sound was the creak of rusty hinges. Inside (spoiler alert), there were trees. Also shrubs, gravel paths, and benches, like a lot of neighborhood parks in New York. Nothing was gilded in twenty-four-karat gold. No diamonds or rubies decorated the flower beds. I wanted there to be a sign on the path welcoming new visitors: ARE YOU NOT UNDERWHELMED?

In the middle of the park stood the statue of a sad-looking old-timey dude, the name EDWIN BOOTH engraved at his feet. I didn't know why Edwin looked so depressed. Maybe he'd lost his hellhound. Anyway, I had the park to myself, so I figured it would be a safer place to call Mrs. O'Leary, rather than on the corner of Third Avenue, where she might trample a taxi.

I closed my eyes. I took a deep breath, trying to calm my anxiety about Hecate obliterating me. I focused on Mrs. O'Leary. *Come here, girl!*

Silence. No rustling in the shadows. No disturbance in the Force. Just me and Edwin Booth standing by ourselves, looking sad.

I held up my bag of doggie goodies and tried again. *Treaty treats!*

Still nothing.

I wondered if Mrs. O'Leary was at Camp Jupiter in California, where she usually hung out these days. If so, she was probably romping around the Field of Mars, playing with her buddy Hannibal the elephant. I felt bad about calling to her, expecting her to shadow-travel all the way across the country. That took a lot of energy. If she got here at all, she might arrive too tired to help me. Then I'd end up with a massive, snoring pile of cuteness.

But I really needed her help.

Reluctantly, I got out my whistle. I blew it. I couldn't hear anything because of the high-pitched sound waves or whatever, but the whistle's inscription lit up in rainbow colors—LEO+PERCY 4EVER . As I may have mentioned, Leo is a doofus.

I thought I was ready for what would happen next. Somehow, it still surprised me. A gust of wind ripped through the park, kicking up funnel clouds of leaves. The tree branches swayed. Their shadows wove together across the gravel path, turning into a pool of darkness. And out of that darkness burst Mrs. O'Leary.

A wall of furry black canine crashed into me, knocking me to the ground.

She slathered me with kisses, which was like being wrapped in a wet sandpaper-textured sleeping bag. I made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a crushed grunt.

"Okay, girl," I said. "I missed you, too."

Thankfully, she always knew when it was time to stop so I didn't suffocate or die from a collapsed rib cage. When I got to my feet, I was covered in dog drool and fur, but I was grinning.

I'd missed my dog.

Yes, I wanted to go to New Rome University to be with Annabeth. No doubt about that. But I also felt like part of my heart was already there. I had good friends among the Roman demigods. My half brother Tyson lived there. And Mrs. O'Leary spent most of her time at Camp Jupiter. She liked the food in the mess hall. She liked the elephant. She liked the whole package.

Maybe I should write an application essay about that. *I want to go to your university because my dog lives there.* Or maybe not.

Mrs. O'Leary gave me one more sloppy kiss across the side of my face; then she started to sniff me, inhaling every scent I had accumulated since we'd last seen each other. She didn't seem pleased with my life choices.

She backed up, shook her head indignantly, and barked, “WOOF!”

Probable translation: *Have you been seeing other hellhounds?*

“It’s Hecuba,” I explained. “Hecate’s dog. We’re just dog-sitting, and she got away.”

I opened my backpack and pulled out Hecuba’s leash.

Mrs. O’Leary recoiled as soon as the scent hit her nose. She gave me a wounded stare.

“I know,” I said. “She’s not nearly as wonderful as you. But I really need your help finding her.”

Mrs. O’Leary growled.

“Why would I want to find her?” I interpreted. “Well … if I don’t, Hecate will kill me. And Grover. And Annabeth.”

Mrs. O’Leary snorted. I read this as *You are a marvel of foolishness, Percy. But fine, I’ll help you.*

She snuffled at the leash, sniffed the air, then bounded off through the park.

I was hoping it would be a short chase. Maybe Mrs. O’Leary would lead me to the nearest corner, and we’d find Hecuba asleep behind a bush.

Of course it wasn’t that easy.

Mrs. O’Leary leaped the fence. She raced off down East 20th, bounding over the tops of cars like they were convenient stepping stones. I wasn’t as good at navigating obstacles, but I did my best to keep up, because I really didn’t want to lose two hellhounds in the same evening.

Unlike Hecuba, Mrs. O’Leary was laser-focused. She didn’t stop to pee on trash cans or assault food-truck vendors. She just kept running, pausing only long enough to sniff the pavement and confirm she was on the right trail.

Yeah! I thought. This is going to work!

That's usually what I say just before something doesn't work.

I followed Mrs. O'Leary west for a few blocks, then south, then west again. Finally, she ducked into an alley between a tattoo parlor and a Trader Joe's. When I caught up with her, Mrs. O'Leary was sniffing around a pile of garbage bags, flattened boxes, and empty fruit crates.

She was wagging her tail, which seemed weird. Given how she'd behaved when she first caught Hecuba's smell, I doubted Mrs. O'Leary would act so happy if she'd really found her. Also, the trash pile she was sniffing wasn't nearly big enough to hide a grown hellhound.

I tried to think positive. "What you got there, girl?"

I inched closer. Maybe she'd gotten sidetracked after all by some lusciously scented food waste. She did love Trader Joe's pumpkin dog treats

—probably because they weren't available in the Camp Jupiter mess hall, and Hades hadn't opened a Trader Joe's in the Underworld (yet).

I reached down to move some fruit crates. From somewhere inside the pile, a small voice yelped, "NOPE!"

I stumbled backward into a crate of rotten bananas.

Mrs. O'Leary didn't look worried, though. Whatever she was smelling, she was curious about it, and excited.

The thing in the pile yapped again—"NOPE!"—and I realized how small it sounded, how afraid ….

My heart twisted in a knot. I had a sudden overpowering urge to help the nope-yapper. I started clearing away boxes and bags. Mrs. O'Leary guided me, nosing through the trash until we unearthed the source of the yapping.

It was a puppy. A hellhound puppy.

His black fur was matted with gunk. Flies buzzed around his cherry-red eyes. His ears were back, and he trembled with fear. A nasty-looking cut zigzagged across his back, like he'd been attacked by something with claws.

I don't cry a lot, but I have to tell you, my eyes watered pretty bad.

"Hey, there," I said as softly as I could. "Hey, buddy. We're not going to hurt you."

I crouched so I wouldn't look so big, which I guess was kind of pointless since Mrs. O'Leary loomed right next to me. "It's going to be okay."

I hoped my tone would be soothing, but I was choking up so bad, I could barely talk. I remembered the stories Tyson had told me about how young Cyclopes grew up on the streets, getting harassed by monsters, hiding in alleys, feeling lonely and afraid all the time. I didn't know if it was the same for hellpuppies, or how this little guy had ended up here. I just knew I had to rescue him.

Mrs. O'Leary must've had the same instinct. As soon as she'd picked up his scent, the whole hunting-Hecuba mission had gone out the window. I

didn't blame her a bit.

I rummaged through my bag and pulled out one of Hecuba's treats. I offered it to the puppy, but he flinched when I extended my hand.

I broke the treat in half. I put one part on the ground and gave the other to Mrs. O'Leary, just to show the puppy that it was safe to eat.

Mrs. O'Leary seemed to understand the situation. She lay down so as not to look threatening.

After a few minutes of me just talking calmly and staying put, the puppy inched forward. He sniffed the treat, then wolfed it down.

Then he looked at me with those big red eyes like, *More?*

We sat there for a long time, until the pup was comfortable enough to eat out of my hand. The poor thing had fleas and ticks, and the hair around his eyes had been eaten by mites, so he had a pale mask, kind of like a reverse polecat. He smelled pretty bad, too, but underneath the stench of garbage and urine I could still catch a whiff of “new puppy.” He couldn’t have been more than six weeks old.

“You want another treat?” I asked him.

“Nope!” he barked, which apparently meant *Yes, please, I’ll take the whole bag.*

I couldn’t help but smile. “Is that your name? Nope?”

He tilted his head, maybe thinking about it. “Nope!”

“Okay, then that’s what I’ll call you.”

He crawled right into my lap. He was heavy—like fifty pounds—and floppy, with ridiculously oversize paws that told me he was going to be a rhino-size hellhound someday. I scratched behind his ears and kept feeding him treats, letting him get used to the sound of my voice.

Meanwhile, Mrs. O’Leary’s eyes were starting to droop. Shadow-traveling took a lot of energy. Hunting down puppies? Also hard work.

Now, lying here calmly and hearing my soothing voice, my OG dog was starting to feel the snooze.

“It’s okay, girl,” I told her. “You did great. Get some rest.”

Mrs. O’Leary grunted. She hauled up her massive body and circled around, making a nest in the flattened cardboard boxes. As soon as she lay down, she dissolved into shadows, leaving nothing but a hellhound-shaped depression.

That made me kind of sad. She’d been with me for, like, thirty seconds, and now she was gone again. But like I said before, she’s her own person. If

she wanted to dissolve into shadows and reappear back at Camp Jupiter, all comfy and cozy in her usual giant doggie bed, who was I to stop her?

“Nope?” asked the puppy.

“I’m not crying,” I said, wiping my eyes.

The cut on Nope’s back looked infected. I could feel his ribs under his fur. Hopefully, Grover would know some hellhound first aid.

“You want to get out of here?” I asked Nope. “You can meet my friends, have a nice warm place to sleep. We’ll get you all better.”

The puppy half-heartedly licked my hand. He was still trembling, but not as bad as before.

I took that as a yes.

I knew this wouldn’t solve our problems. Hecuba and Gale were still on the loose. The manse was still a wreck. Hecate was still going to incinerate us. In fact, this was the most ADHD move I’d ever made in a career of ADHD moves. I’d gone out to find two missing pets and was coming home with a different dog instead. But anytime you can help a puppy, you should help a puppy. I picked up Nope as gently as I could, draped him over one shoulder like a baby, and started back toward Gramercy Park.

E L E V E N

We Have Pizza with Extra Tears

“Nope,” I said, holding out the dog for Annabeth and Grover to see.

Nope was so excited he peed on my shoes.

Annabeth moved back out of the splash zone. She looked exhausted. She had a mop in her hand, rubble in her hair, and smears of strawberry ice cream all over her clothes. Grover was standing up now, at least, but he still looked like he’d been punched repeatedly in the stomach.

“Adorable pup,” Annabeth said. “But I don’t think we can pass him off as Hecuba. Where did you find him?”

I told them the story while Annabeth mopped up the pee. I guess always being prepared has its disadvantages. When you're the one who happens to be holding the mop, you get to mop.

Neither Annabeth nor Grover scolded me for failing to find Hecuba and Gale. Maybe they were just too tired, or maybe they figured we were doomed anyway, so we might as well be doomed with a cute puppy.

"Poor little guy," Grover said. "That's a nasty cut on his back."

"Nope!" barked Nope.

"Yeah," Grover agreed. "That's okay."

"What did he say?" I asked.

"Well, he's just a pup," Grover explained. "He isn't barking in complete sentences yet. Basically, he said *I pee on boy, boy is mine*."

"Makes sense," I said. "Uh, anyone else want to hold him?"

Annabeth leaned her mop against the wall and came to get the puppy. He squirmed, pushing himself off my chest, apparently anxious to get to his new mama. I didn't blame him.

"There we go," Annabeth said, embracing the dark mass of hell-fluff.

"Who's a good Nope?"

The dog licked the side of her face and peed some more.

"Okay, we're going to have to work on the bladder control," Annabeth said. "But you're too sweet to get mad at."

"Nope!" Nope concurred.

Annabeth set down the dog and off he went, exploring his new digs.

Every time his nose bumped into something that startled him—a chair, a menacing-looking coffee table—he leaped back and barked at it until he was sure it had submitted to his puppy dominance.

“Grover, can you get him healed up?” I asked. “I figured you were his best hope.”

Grover had trouble meeting my eyes. Our emotions had been connected for years, ever since he formed an empathy link with me in seventh grade.

He was well aware of how mad I’d been earlier. I could tell he was still weighed down by a strawberry-scented cloud of guilt. Nevertheless, he seemed to realize I was making a peace offering.

“Sure thing,” he said. “A little nature magic and a warm bath, he’ll be good as new. Come on, Nope.”

“Nope!” He obediently followed Grover toward the kitchen, barking and snapping at the satyr’s hooves.

I turned to Annabeth. “So, what now?”

That’s what I do anytime I have a problem I can’t solve, which happens, like, every sixty seconds. I ask Annabeth.

She looked down at my pee-soaked shoes and her own splattered clothes.

“First, let’s get cleaned up. I’ll meet you back here in thirty minutes.”

I must have been pretty tired, because I staggered into a bathroom I hadn’t seen before, where the shower sprayed sideways at the toilet. I didn’t feel like finding another bathroom, so I just willed the water to corkscrew around me and took a tornado shower. It worked out okay, though I did give my hair a swirlie that wouldn’t come out no matter how much I combed it.

We reconvened in the ruins of the great room. I’m not going to say I felt refreshed, or more hopeful. When I looked at Hecuba’s empty dog bed, Gale’s heavy-metal harness, and the shattered stained-glass windows, I felt

a sinkhole opening in my stomach, swallowing all my hopes of getting through the week alive. But at least I was clean, and I was with my friends.

Somehow, Annabeth had managed to order pizza. How she'd gotten it delivered to an invisible mansion without the use of a phone app, I don't know. It smelled amazing, though.

She was sitting cross-legged on her tattered, half-burned bedroll, chomping on a slice of mushroom and black olive. Lying on the floor next to her were the three door knockers she'd rescued from the wreckage of the

front entrance. They were silent, probably still in shock from losing their purpose in life to a giant rampaging goat monster.

As for Grover, he was eating garlic breadsticks. I knew from experience this would make his breath smell putrid for days, but the guy had had a rough afternoon, so I wasn't going to protest.

Nope scampered back and forth between Annabeth and Grover, nuzzling for bites and wagging his tail so hard his whole body shook. Grover had done a great job of getting him cleaned up and bandaged. The puppy's fur had puffed out so much he looked like a black Underworld dandelion.

When Nope saw me, he barked happily, slamming down his front paws in a play bow. I didn't need to be a satyr to understand what he was saying.

Boy gimme pizza or I pee on boy again!

I got a slice and picked off pieces of pepperoni for him while he stared at me with those big, sad hell-spawn eyes.

"So, um …" I wasn't sure how to follow up that great opener. I wanted to offer an incredible plan for solving all our problems, except I didn't have one. "I guess I can get back out there and search through the night."

Annabeth shook her head. "We can't just randomly canvass the city.

Hecuba and Gale are magical creatures. They could be anywhere. They might decide to come home on their own, or …"

That was a pretty big *OR*.

Or they could terrorize the five boroughs and bring death, destruction, and polecat gas upon the innocent people of New York. *Or* they could disappear into the Underworld and refuse to ever be found. *Or, or, or.*

My eyes drifted up to the balcony, where Hecate's crossed torches were still fixed on the railing. "Maybe we could use those," I said. "This seems like an emergency. They might … I dunno, light a way back home for the pets."

Annabeth's frown told me she'd already thought of this and dismissed the idea. "Just a gut feeling? I'd leave those torches alone. They're a serious last resort. They might even alert Hecate that we're in trouble. First, we should try to think our way through this, solve the problem on our own."

"*Problems*, plural," I said. "Missing hellhound. Missing polecat.

Destroyed house."

Grover dabbed his tears away with the end of a breadstick. "Guys …"

"Don't say it, G-man," I told him. "Don't apologize. Annabeth's right.

We're going to figure this out."

He heaved a sigh, possibly because Nope had taken advantage of his distraction and stolen the breadstick. It probably tasted even better seasoned with salty satyr tears.

"We all mess up," Annabeth consoled him. "Remember when Percy sent Medusa's head to Mount Olympus? Or when he got a nosebleed and woke up Gaea? Or that time—"

"Are you just running down a list of times *I* messed up?" I asked.

Annabeth shrugged. "You're cute when you mess up."

That didn't seem to help Grover's mood. He watched listlessly as Nope chewed on his left hoof.

“We’re all going to die!” he sobbed. “We’re going to die with a puppy, which is always how I wanted to go, but still—”

“Nobody is going to die,” Annabeth promised. “We still have three days before Hecate comes back.”

Grover moaned. “You’re right. Then we’ll die on Halloween, with all our friends watching!”

I took a second to process that. “Wait …. You already sent out the party invitations?”

“Of course!” he said. “This morning, before everything went strawberry.

I gave them to the aurae.”

I imagined dozens of wind spirits carrying Grover’s letters to Camp Half-Blood and beyond, fancy envelopes fluttering into the hands of every demigod we knew. *Join us Friday for a party at Hecate’s! Watch us die a painful death! Costumes optional!*

I sighed. “Grover …”

“It’s okay.” Annabeth sounded like she was trying to convince herself as much as the rest of us. “That just gives us more incentive to fix everything.

We know our deadline. We’ve got work to do.”

She brushed her hands on her pants and stood up. “Tomorrow morning, I’m calling in sick.”

My spirits lifted. “Cool. Me, too.”

“No, you don’t,” she said. “*I’m* ahead in my schoolwork. *You* need to go to class.”

“Awww,” I complained.

“Look,” she said, “hellhounds usually only roam at night, right?”

“I guess. But Hecate said we should walk them twice during the d—”

“And polecats are naturally nocturnal too, aren’t they?” She turned to Grover.

“Uh, I think so,” he said.

“Then tomorrow,” Annabeth concluded, “we can assume the pets will be okay sleeping during the day. They won’t be causing trouble. That means I’ll have time to hit Hecate’s library, learn everything I can about Hecuba and Gale. I know they were both human once. Hecuba was the queen of Troy. Gale … I think she was a witch? Anyway, hopefully I’ll find some clues about where they went. Then in the evening, when Percy gets back from school, we can continue the search.”

Grover sniffled. “And I’ll spend the day cleaning.” He gazed across the destroyed furniture and shattered windows. “Though that seems hopeless

….”

“One problem at a time,” Annabeth said. “We’ll figure this out.”

I’m not sure she believed that, but I think we both sensed that Grover’s present state of mind was a sheet of thin ice. It wouldn’t support much weight.

Nope kept gnawing on Grover’s hoof. Maybe it was his way of trying to help, or maybe he was just teething. Grover didn’t seem to mind, but I was kind of worried my friend might wake up in the morning without a left foot.

“Okay, then,” I said. “I’ll go to school tomorrow. At night, we’ll hunt for the pets.”

Nope got tired of gnawing. He yawned, curled up next to Grover, and closed his eyes.

“The pup has the right idea,” Grover said. “I guess …”

And just like that he keeled over and began to snore. I wished I could fall asleep as easily as satyrs and pups. I imagined Grover dreaming of strawberry fields, while Nope dreamed of tasty goat hooves.

I glanced at Annabeth. I could see the exhaustion and anxiety on her face.

Used to be, when we were younger, she was better at hiding it, or maybe I just didn't know her as well then.

"We're going to get through this," I said.

She looked surprised—me comforting her, kind of switching things up.

"Yeah," she said. "We've overcome worse, right?"

"For sure." I didn't want to say what we were both probably thinking: *Eventually, our luck has to run out. You can only flip a coin so many times before it comes up tails, you lose.*

But there was no point in dwelling on that. Instead, I cleaned up the pizza, said good night to the eels, and got ready for bed.

Wednesday, I would do the heroic thing and go to school. While I was there, maybe I could do more than just catch up on my work. Perhaps I could attempt something that had rarely been tried in a school environment: I could take a stab at learning useful information—something that might actually help us stay alive.

T W E LV E

I Get Schooled by an Old Friend First, I tried to find Eudora, my supernatural guidance counselor.

Since she was the Nereid in charge of gifts from the sea, I thought maybe she could supply me with a magical fish that attracted hellhounds, or a pirate's leg bone that acted like catnip for polecats …. I don't know.

Something.

But Eudora was AWOL. Her office was empty. The candy jar on her desk contained no Jolly Ranchers. Bummer. I glanced at Sicky Frog, the purple cartoon wall painting left over from the time when this room used to be an elementary school nurse's office.

“I get the feeling Eudora is trying to avoid me,” I told him.

Sicky Frog looked miserable.

“Why is she so scared of Hecate?” I asked.

Sicky Frog had no answers.

“Good talk,” I said. “Hope you feel better soon.”

Second idea: I stopped by my history teacher’s classroom. Dr. Sharma had her prep period when I had English. Since we were watching a movie that day in English, I figured I could miss a few minutes.

Dr. Sharma was pretty cool—and not just because she’d said *Very good, Mr. Jackson* the day before. She knew a lot about ancient cultures.

She’d been bugging me to pick a topic for my paper on a forgotten historical figure. I’d been avoiding it, since I’d met so many forgotten historical figures and killed them all. Now, though, maybe I could ask Dr.

Sharma what she knew about Hecuba, queen of Troy. She might be able to tell me something that would help me find the hellhound. If it saved me from breaking my brain against a mountain of history books, all the better.

I strolled up to her open doorway and froze when I looked inside.

The man who was eating a late breakfast at Dr. Sharma’s desk was definitely not Dr. Sharma.

His dark hair and beard were flecked with gray. He wore a rumpled tweed jacket, tie, and dress shirt, with a flannel blanket over his lap. His old-fashioned wheelchair had hand-pushed steel wheels and well-worn black

leather armrests. He held a half-eaten bagel in one hand and a steaming cup of tea in other. I registered all these details with perfect clarity, but somehow, I still did not recognize him.

The best way I can describe the feeling is like bungee jumping. One second, you're at the top of a cliff. The next, the river is hurtling toward you. Your senses are screaming on high alert. You see the water. Then, suddenly, it's racing away from you again as you recoil into the air, and you're left halfway between, not sure if you're in two places at once or nowhere at all.

Finally, my brain caught up.

"M-Mr. Brunner?" I stammered.

I hadn't called him *Mr. Brunner* since I was twelve years old, but old habits die hard. Seeing him back behind a teacher's desk after all these years …

He glanced over with a smile. A dollop of cream cheese clung to his beard. "Percy! Hello, my boy."

My mind raced. What year was I in? I instinctively started worrying about whether I'd done my Latin homework, because back in sixth grade, he was the only teacher I'd cared about doing well for. My disorientation was even worse because Mr. Brunner looked exactly as he had back then, being secretly immortal and all.

"You teach here now?" I asked.

"Just filling in as a substitute." The corners of his eyes crinkled. "Your stepfather recommended me."

"You know Paul?" I tried to remember when the two of them might have met—the Battle of Manhattan, maybe? I'd been too busy at the time to keep track of who everybody was meeting, fighting, or killing.

Mr. Brunner chuckled. "Of course. Paul is an excellent teacher. He got me on the substitute list for the district."

"So, you're watching over a possible demigod at AHS?" I wondered who it might be, and why they hadn't started manifesting their powers until high school. Molly Leary was always constructing Lego murder-bots in the engineering lab and sending them into the halls to terrorize people.

Potential child of Hephaestus?

“No, no, Percy,” Mr. Brunner assured me. “The only demigod I know of at AHS is you. I simply like to teach from time to time, to keep my skills fresh!”

He sounded as if he meant it … though how anyone could enjoy being a substitute teacher was beyond me. That was like volunteering to be the target on an archery range.

He set his cup down on a stack of papers. “I wasn’t expecting you until later in the day. Dr. Sharma has you for fourth period, yes? Ancient Cultures. My favorite!”

I found myself smiling. I couldn’t believe my good luck. This was even better than talking to Dr. Sharma, because with Mr. Brunner, I could tell him everything.

“I’m so glad to see you,” I said. “I need—”

“Just a moment, my boy.” He winced as he shifted in his wheelchair. “I rode here this morning on the Long Island Railroad. My back legs are killing me. Since you’re here, would you mind watching the door while I get out and stretch?”

“Oh, uh, sure.”

Because why not make things more awkward?

I kept lookout as Mr. Brunner undid his wheelchair. The blanket-covered fake human legs swung sideways like car door. He grasped his armrests and slowly pulled himself out of the chair, which was a magical storage space big enough to contain his true form. First the front legs of a horse emerged, then the full body of a magnificent stallion, until standing before me was the centaur Chiron, activities director of Camp Half-Blood, immortal trainer of heroes, his head nearly brushing the fluorescent light fixtures.

He clopped around the classroom, flicking his tail, shaking his back legs, and knocking the student desks out of alignment.

Nobody came down the hall. I'm not sure what I would have said if someone did.

Oh, hi, just lounging in the doorway of this classroom. Those clopping sounds? I don't hear anything.

What bothered me more was the way Chiron limped on his back left leg.

I'd noticed it for the first time last summer, which makes me sound super inattentive, I know. In my defense: 1) every summer I'd attended Camp Half-Blood, I'd actually spent ninety percent of my time *not* at camp, running around the world on quests, trying not to die. I'd never focused on how Chiron walked when he was in centaur form. Also, 2) I was, in fact, super inattentive.

Once I noticed the limp, I kind of fixated on it. It gradually occurred to me that the guy didn't use his wheelchair just as a disguise. For him, walking was painful. Sometimes he needed a break. Once I spotted him with a leg brace. Another time I stumbled across him in the Apollo cabin, getting some herbal lotions to rub on his knee.

Finally, I'd asked Annabeth what the deal was. She'd looked at me like she wanted to whack me upside the head with a two-by-four piece of DUH.

"That was Hercules's fault," she said. "He wounded Chiron in the leg with a poisoned arrow."

"Why?"

"It was an accident. He was aiming for another centaur."

"Stupid Hercules," I grumbled. "Wait, you mean this happened thousands of years ago, and it hasn't healed yet?"

"It *can't* heal," Annabeth said. "And I can't believe you're just noticing.

Chiron is in agony every day of his eternal life. He does a good job hiding it, but the main thing that keeps him going is that he cares about us, the demigods he trains."

Wow.

After that, I'd felt super guilty. Not once had it occurred to me that Chiron was in pain. I'd never asked him how he was feeling. I'd never sent him a card on Centaur Appreciation Day. I hadn't told him *Thank you for putting up with me* nearly enough times. And after more than five years, I felt awkward saying anything at this point.

Chiron stretched his back leg one more time. He winced, gritting his teeth. "Yes. Much better, thank you."

From his tone, I guessed it wasn't much better. Chiron backed into his wheelchair, closed the fake-leg hatch, and once again he was Mr. Brunner, a mild-mannered substitute teacher with a tweed jacket and a half-eaten oat bagel.

He straightened his tie. "So, Percy, was there something I could help you with?"

On one hand, I felt bad dumping my problems on him. On the other hand, he looked like he was really interested in hearing them. Chiron had always been a good listener. Maybe he welcomed the distraction. I was nothing if not distracting.

I told him about Hecate and our little situation with her broken-down mansion and missing pets.

If my goal had been to make Chiron look even more pained, I succeeded beautifully.

"Oh, dear," he said.

"Yeah."

"And Hecate returns Friday night?"

I nodded. “How bad have we messed up?”

He drummed his fingers on his armrest. “Well … I’ve seen worse. When Sinon convinced the Trojans to let the wooden horse inside their gates, for instance, or when Salmoneus pretended to be Zeus and got his entire city destroyed.”

“Great.”

“At least Hecate won’t destroy all of New York. She owns property in Manhattan, so that borough’s probably safe ….”

I guess my expression must’ve been pretty dismal.

Chiron cleared his throat. “Let’s not dwell on worst-case scenarios. You say Annabeth and Grover are helping you.”

“Yeah.”

“Well then, I have full confidence. Together, you three are a powerful team. Do you have a plan?”

“Uh … my first thought was Hecate’s torches. She said we could use them in case of emergency.”

“No!” Chiron yelped so loudly I almost fell over. “No, Percy, Hecate’s torches raise ghosts to do her bidding. At this time of year—what you call Halloween—the torches become even more powerful. You cannot risk it unless you want an army of angry spirits to tear you apart. Why Hecate would tell you to use them, I can’t imagine … unless she is trying to test you.”

I gave that some thought. If a god was going to test me, I would’ve preferred multiple choice. Then again, Hecate was all about multiple choices. She stood at the crossroads, waiting to see which direction you would take.

Maybe it wasn’t a coincidence that she’d left a strawberry-flavored experiment behind—with a loose lid, at that—to tempt Grover. Or that

she'd suggested I use her torches. Or that she'd mentioned her tantalizingly dangerous library … which Annabeth would be exploring right about now.

A feeling of dread crept down my back.

But why would Hecate set us up to fail? When it came to her pets, she was the original helicopter mom. She wouldn't want to lose them. As for letting us wreck her mansion … it seemed like a pretty convoluted way to get her insurance company to pay for a remodel.

"Okay, no torches, then," I said. "I've been attacked by enough spirits of the dead for one lifetime."

Chiron's expression darkened. "Ah, but not all ghosts are souls of the departed, Percy. Some of the worst ghosts can be memories, regrets … the choices we've made, or failed to make."

Great.

I remembered the flickering blue image of the child on the bicycle. I wondered if that had been a departed soul, or a living memory, or if it mattered, because either way it had freaked me out.

"So, Plan B," I said. "I went by Eudora's office to ask for her help, but she's been in hiding ever since Hecate showed up."

Chiron nearly choked on his bagel. "The Nereid Eudora? She's *here*?"

Silly me, assuming all the immortal beings who passed through my school knew about one another. Alternative High was like Ancient Greek Grand Central Station. I told Chiron about my questionably helpful counselor, and how she'd made herself scarce when the triple-headed trick-or-treater appeared.

Chiron sipped his tea. "That must have been a shock for Eudora."

"Those two have a history?"

"It's not my story to tell," Chiron said. "But yes … a complicated history."

“Having to do with choices?” I guessed. “Regrets?”

He looked at the remains of his breakfast as if they had personally disappointed him. “Something like that. Do you have a Plan C?”

“I was going to ask Dr. Sharma what she knew about Hecuba, maybe get a lead on where she might go. But since you’re here …”

Chiron relaxed his shoulders. “*That* I can help with. Hecuba was the last queen of Troy. When the Greeks took the city, they killed her children and enslaved her. Hecuba despaired and threw herself into the sea. She would have died, but the goddess Hecate took pity on her and turned her into a dog.”

I made a mental note never to earn Hecate’s pity. Being a dog didn’t sound like much of a consolation prize.

“So … would she go back to the sea?” I asked.

“I doubt it,” Chiron said. “For Trojans, bad things always came from the sea ….” His eyes lit up. “Like the Greeks! Hecuba hated the Greeks. She still would. She might be looking for opportunities for revenge.”

“Please don’t tell me she went to Greece.”

“She wouldn’t need to,” Chiron said. “She would follow the nearest scent. There are many enclaves of Greek immigrants nearby. Why, we’re presently in one.”

“Alternative High School?”

Chiron showed his immense patience by not laughing in my face. “No, my boy. Astoria. This part of Queens has a huge Greek community.”

“You mean Hecuba might be around here right now?”

Somehow this seemed both reasonable and annoying—that the dog I was hunting for would be, like, right next door, chewing on some poor dude with Greek heritage.

“That is one possibility,” Chiron said. “If so, she will be hunting at night, looking for mortals to scare to death. Casting spells of mischief. Causing bad luck. You must find her.”

I shuddered. “I guess I can go back to the mansion, get her treats, and search Astoria tonight.”

“Treats might work,” Chiron agreed. “But there is another possibility.

You said you called on Mrs. O’Leary last night. When she started following a scent, where did it lead her?”

“Straight to the nearest hellpuppy,” I said. “Which was kind of sweet. But also, not so helpful.”

“On the contrary, my boy. Female hellhounds have a strong maternal instinct. Mrs. O’Leary proved that. While Hecuba is no longer human, she is still haunted by the deaths of her children. She would be very, ah, motherly, in her own way. This puppy of yours might prove useful.”

A plan started to form in my head. It was a strange sensation, actually having some idea of what I was going to do.

“That’s really helpful,” I said. “Thanks, Mr.—Chiron.”

The old centaur smiled. “You may call me Brunner or Chiron, as you wish, Percy. I am happy with both identities. Unfortunately, even if you find Hecuba, you’ll still have to locate Gale and fix the mansion. So many problems, so little time.”

“That’s kind of my life story,” I said. “I don’t suppose you could write me a note, get me out of school for the rest of the day?”

Chiron frowned. “Now, Percy, you know you have a quiz in Dr. Sharma’s class. We can’t let you miss that, can we?”

Suddenly I remembered the downside of having Mr. Brunner as a teacher.

He believed in me, which meant he believed in my grades. He always insisted on me trying my best.

“No, sir,” I mumbled. “I guess I’ll wait until after school.”

“Excellent,” he said. “Run along to class. I know you will do well on the test!”

T H I RT E E N

I Get Extra Time and Candy Corn I did not do well.

Not on the quiz. Not on the rest of my school day. Not on getting back to the mansion after swim practice.

What is it about gods on the subway? I was on the W train halfway to Union Square when Hecate decided to check up on me. Fortunately, there weren't many other people in my train car. Nobody else seemed to notice the bench across from me turning black like a withering plant, then the whole side of the train melting into a rippling, bubbling mirror of shadows.

The three beastly faces of Hecate emerged from the gloom—the horse, the lion, the dog all staring at me with their blazing eyes.

"Did you try to call?" Hecate asked, her voice whinnying from the horse's mouth.

Still, nobody else on the train reacted. I was reluctant to answer the goddess, since I would probably look like I was talking to myself. On the other hand, it wouldn't be the first time New York commuters had seen that on the train. I really needed to start carrying a dummy pair of headphones with me. Then people would think I was just talking to a friend and not communing with otherworldly forces.

"No, I didn't call," I said. "Why?"

"I heard you speak my name," said the lion. "More times than usual. Is everything all right?"

I should have known better than to use her name so often. That tends to get a god's attention. It's the divine equivalent of a butt-dial.

Now I'd have to be careful what I said. If I lied, she would probably sense that. But I also couldn't tell her the truth. The truth would get me trampled faster than a raging strawberry goat monster would.

"Oh, sorry," I said. "I was just talking about you in my Ancient Cultures class."

Her six fiery eyes burned into my soul. "I see," the dog's head growled.

"I am considered ancient, now, am I?"

"No! I mean—"

Her three heads laughed, which was really disturbing.

“Relax, Percy Jackson.” Hecate morphed into a middle-aged woman in a black dress—her default evil-principal look. She sat on an obsidian throne in the middle of her shadowy gateway, munching from a bag of candy corn.

“I am just teasing you.”

“I knew that.” I forced a smile. “Ha-ha.”

“Everything is fine at home, then?” she asked.

Evasive maneuvers! I thought. I couldn’t lie. I couldn’t tell the truth.

Maybe I should follow the lead of the third door knocker and spout something random like *Fahrvergnügen!*

“Just heading back now,” I said. “Wow, Hecuba and Gale sure love their walks. They really surprised us the first night.”

Hecate chuckled. “Yes, my little babies.” She bit off the tip of a candy corn with her sharp white teeth, which made me think of guillotines. “I hope they’re not being too much trouble.”

“How’s the trip going?” I asked, changing the topic all subtle-like.

“Where are you today?”

When in doubt, I’ve found the best way to distract someone is to get them talking about themselves. That seems to be a source of endless fascination for selves everywhere.

“Ireland!” Hecate said. “Helping them prepare for the Púca Festival.

They have an entire *night* of torch dancing, obviously in honor of me, though they’ve gotten their traditions a bit mixed up over the millennia, bless their hearts.”

“Right,” I said. “With candy corn?”

“Oh, no, I brought that with me,” Hecate said. “I always travel with a bag of candy corn.”

This was horrifying, but somehow not surprising.

“Glad you’ve having fun,” I said. “Hey, just curious, you would never

…”

I stopped myself. I’d been thinking about Chiron’s comment that maybe Hecate was setting us up. Now that she was right here in front of me, I was itching to confront her about that. I’d almost asked *You would never want us to fail, lose your pets, and destroy your house, would you?* That was a Percy-level bad idea. It would lead to questions about how we had, actually, lost her pets and destroyed her house.

“I would never do what?” Hecate asked.

I needed to pivot—turn my question into something that would help us, not get us killed more quickly.

“Uh, you would never consider extending your trip, would you? Couple of days? An extra week?”

Hecate narrowed her eyes. “Why would I do that?”

I felt like I was sweating into my bench, melting into my own puddle of shadows. “Well, you’re having such fun. You don’t get much time off. I imagine there’s a lot of festivals you won’t be able to make.”

A tense moment passed. I waited for Hecate to snap her fingers, teleport to her mansion, learn what was going on, then come back and hurl my W

train straight to Tartarus.

She laughed. “So, you *do* like my pets. I knew they would grow on you!

Don’t worry, Percy Jackson. If you do a good job this week, I will put you on my list of preferred pet-sitters for the future.”

“I mean, yay.”

“But I would feel bad coming home any later.”

“I get it. Maybe just … aim for Saturday morning? Friday night is Halloween, after all. It would be a shame to cut that short. We don’t mind.”

She nibbled pensively on a candy corn. “Well … I have always wanted to attend that festival in Transylvania.”

“Transylvania!” I nodded. “I love that for you.”

“The Ritual Killing of the Living Dead, you know.”

“Sounds fun!”

“They know me so well there. Plus they have yummy kürtőskalács.”

I thought she’d said *conniption fits*, but I used my context clues and decided that couldn’t be right. Unless Hecate found Transylvanian temper tantrums tasty.

“Yum!” I said.

“Very well,” Hecate decided. “I will return on Saturday morning. Thank you, Percy Jackson!”

“Don’t mention it.”

“And when I return, if everything isn’t just as I left it …”

“Oh, don’t worry!” I said. “Worrying is *my* job. I am excellent at worrying.”

No lies detected, obviously.

Hecate laughed. “Onward, then!”

She disappeared in an implosion of darkness, leaving behind her bag of candy corn, as if I needed another threat.

When I got back to Gramercy Park, Grover's first comment was "Is that candy corn?"

"Yeah." I handed him the bag. "It's gross. Enjoy."

As Grover chowed down, I joined him and Annabeth on the great-room floor and told them about my terrible, horrible, no-good, very-bad goddess-butt-dial day. Hellpuppy Nope curled up in Annabeth's lap and listened.

When I was done, Annabeth said, "I'm jealous. Chiron *never* substitutes at School of Design. You are so lucky."

I imagined the centaur rolling up to Advanced Dressmaking with a sparkly tie, rhinestone glasses, and sequins on his wheel rims. He could have totally pulled it off.

"Nope!" offered Nope.

"I know," Grover told him. "But I don't think Percy will like that name."

"Excuse me?" I asked.

Grover shifted anxiously, like someone might take away his candy bag.

"Nope made up names for all of us. Annabeth is Mom."

Annabeth beamed. "What a good dog!"

"I'm Chew Toy," Grover said. Then, before I could laugh, he added,

"You're Alley Boy."

Annabeth kept a straight face. "It's perfect."

"Seaweed Brain is bad enough," I grumbled. "Alley Boy sounds like some sort of D-list superhero sidekick."

"The Adventures of Mom, Chew Toy, and Alley Boy," Annabeth mused.

“We should pitch that to Hollywood.”

I wasn’t sure if she was kidding, which always made me nervous.

“Anyway,” I said, “I managed to buy us a few more hours. Hecate won’t be back until Saturday morning.”

“That’s good.” Grover gazed forlornly around the damaged house. He’d done what he could to clean up the debris. The front door was covered with a plastic shower curtain. The knockers had been wrapped in paper towels and tucked in a cardboard box. Most of the broken furniture had been cleared away. But there wasn’t much he could do to hide the broken stained-glass windows and the massive goat-hoof craters in the walls.

“Maybe if we find some duct tape …”

“One thing at a time,” Annabeth reminded him. “Tonight, our mission is Hecuba. She’s the biggest, most dangerous pet. If Chiron is right, she’ll be out there hunting Greeks as soon as the sun goes down.”

She turned to me. “I spent all day in the library, and I learned … well, pretty much what Chiron told you. Which is annoying, since I had to translate most of the information from Greek and Latin.”

“On the bright side,” I said, “you didn’t turn into a flaming purple armadillo.”

“Not yet,” she agreed. “Though some of the books in that room …” She shook her head in amazement. “I could swear they were calling to me, urging me to read them.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” I said. “I fear Hecate may be tempting us to make bad choices.”

I told them what I’d been thinking about the strawberry concoction, the library, and the torches. I wasn’t sure if the moray eels were supposed to be a temptation—unless they were a temptation for me to strangle a moray eel.

In which case, well played, Hecate.

Grover sniffled. “I appreciate you saying all that, Percy. But this is still my fault. I was weak!”

“Hey.” I patted his knee. “One thing at a time, G-man, like Annabeth said. Let’s get over to Astoria. Lots of Greeks there for Hecuba to terrorize.

Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

Annabeth nodded. “We’ll bring her leash, lots of treats, and chew toys.”

“Nope!” said Nope.

“He means actual chew toys, not me,” Grover explained to him. “Though I’m going, too.”

“Nope!”

“And we’ll bring the puppy,” I said. “Maybe Hecuba will be feeling maternal.”

Nope must’ve understood. He wagged his tail with such excitement he peed in Annabeth’s lap.

She took it better than I would have. She just sighed and moved the dog to the floor. “Let me change my pants. Then we’ll head to Queens.”

“And if the treats don’t work?” Grover asked. “Or the chew toys or the pup?”

I tried to think of an optimistic answer. The three of us would be scouring New York for a hellhound we couldn’t fight and that we would have to

convince to come home, and she would definitely smell us coming because we all reeked of hellpuppy pee.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. Then I said the words that would come back to haunt me in a not-so-fun, non-Halloween-ish way. “Alley Boy will have to figure something out.”

F O U RT E E N

We Find Some Dead Guys

Things went downhill when we encountered Athena.

At first, we were having a nice evening walk through Astoria with our demonic puppy (though he definitely needed training on the leash). The storefronts were all decorated for Halloween. The trees were dropping their yellow leaves. Cooking smells from a dozen different restaurants scented the air.

Astoria may be a famously Greek neighborhood, but in New York that just means more tavernas than usual mixed in with the taquerias, ramen joints,

and sushi bars. You never get just one kind of thing in this city. It's always every flavor all the time. That's why I love it.

I was feeling a little wistful about this as we walked. I wondered whether the Bay Area would ever feel as much like home … and if I would live long enough to find out.

Grover interrupted my reverie. "Over there. I smell something."

"Nope!" the puppy agreed. He started straining on his new leash (well, his hand-me-down Hecuba leash) like he really wanted to cross the street.

On the north side of 30th Avenue was a tree-lined park. It wasn't nearly as big as Gramercy Park—just a plaza with statues and benches, flanked on one side by a playground structure and the other side by a basketball court.

After my wrestling contest with a cranky god in Washington Square Park last month, I didn't want to visit any more playgrounds. This time, I'd probably be forced to play a pickup game of HORSE with the god of lost dogs. I'd probably fail at that, too.

Annabeth slipped her hand into mine. "It'll be okay. I know this place.

Let's go."

In front of the park, a sign read ATHENS SQUARE.

Nope didn't care about that, but he thought the iron fence was really interesting. He sniffed all the pee messages from the other dogs, then lifted his leg and hit reply.

The plaza was dark and empty. Always a good sign when you're looking for trouble. Greeting us near the entrance was a statue of the goddess of

wisdom herself—Athena in her battle armor. She had one arm extended, palm up, as if demanding, *Am I a joke to you?*

"Hi, Mom," Annabeth said. "Just looking for a hellhound."

I waited for the statue to smack me upside the head, but it remained motionless. On Olympus, Athena probably found it more amusing to keep me in suspense.

Nope tugged harder on his leash, dragging me farther into the plaza.

Once he was full-grown, he was going to be a lot of fun to walk, probably way too much for the meager powers of Alley Boy.

The central courtyard was tiled in gray and white diamond-shaped stones that made me feel dizzy looking at them. At the far end stood three Greek columns, very on-brand, and two statues of dudes in robes who I assumed (wild guess) were probably ancient Greeks. In front of the columns was a circular dais tiled like a compass rose. This was probably where the locals had events in the summertime, but to me, the whole place screamed *human sacrifice*.

I'd been offered up as a human sacrifice too many times in my life already. That wasn't what I wanted to go trick-or-treating as this year.

Nope pulled me toward the dais. As we got closer, I saw a large dark stain splashed across the compass rose, like someone had tossed a bucketful of ink on it.

"Whoa, boy," I said, tugging him back. "Maybe we shouldn't."

Nope didn't listen, and neither did Annabeth. She ran ahead to check out the stain of liquid evil.

Nope thought it smelled amazing. It bubbled and hissed around the edges, reminding me of Hecate's shadow portal on the W train. I was afraid the goddess might pop out and demand Transylvanian pastries.

Grover sniffed the darkness. "Hecuba made this, definitely. She was either shadow-trailing here or shadow-traveling out. I'm not sure which."

In the distance, someone screamed. A familiar howl echoed through neighborhood—the war cry of a dog, but much too deep and loud for any

earthly canine.

“I’m going to guess Hecuba’s still around,” I said.

We raced toward the sounds of terror.

Across the street from the basketball court was a kebab joint called Sal’s Souvlaki.

From half a block away, we could see diners rushing out of the restaurant, screaming and stumbling over one another, holding pointy kebab sticks even though their moms had probably told them not to run with sharp objects.

“Rats!” one yelled as he ran past us. “Huge rats!”

“Oh, great,” I muttered. When mortals look through the Mist and see rats, you can be pretty sure they’re not actually rats. As Nope towed me along, I fished my pen-sword out of my pocket, because I too love to run with sharp objects.

Grover trotted beside me. “If Hecuba’s inside,” he said, “maybe we can coax her out with—OH, NO!”

He slammed on the brakes. (Imagine his hooves had brakes.) Annabeth grabbed my arm and pulled me back, almost snapping me like a wishbone between her and the eager pup.

“Hecuba’s not inside,” said Annabeth. “Look.”

She pointed toward the fifth-story roofline. Looming over Sal’s Souvlaki, looking like a proper superhero and not some knockoff alley-dwelling sidekick, was Hecuba herself, her front paws planted on the coping stones, her eyes glowing balefully, her fangs bared. She seemed to be sniffing the fear in the air and enjoying herself immensely.

As soon as Nope sensed her presence, he whimpered, hid behind my legs, and started trembling violently. He was a smart puppy.

“So, if Hecuba’s up there,” I said, “what’s in the restaurant?”

I really needed to learn not to ask questions like that. As the last of the diners ran screaming into the night, the restaurant’s plate-glass window shattered, and half a dozen undead warriors tumbled onto the sidewalk.

They were rotting corpses with ancient armor, corroded swords, and glowing red eyes like Hecuba’s, as if they were all plugged into the same power source. They were definitely not rats.

“Trojan soldiers,” Annabeth grumbled.

“Did you know Hecuba could summon the dead?” I asked.

“No, but it’s just our luck.” She scowled up at the roof. “Hecuba, bad dog! Stop terrorizing these poor mortals!”

Hecuba snarled down at us. She turned and melted into shadows just as her minions attacked.

They say there’s a first time for everything. I had never tried hand-to-hand combat while holding a dog’s leash, and I would not recommend it.

My Celestial bronze blade worked just fine against the undead. No complaints about that. I cut down the first reanimated corpse (while getting tangled in Nope’s leash, of course), then sliced another two undead into dust. Meanwhile, Annabeth launched herself at another dead guy, driving her dagger into his face, while Grover goat-kicked one right through the windshield of a parked Toyota.

“Sorry!” he yelled to no one in particular. “I can’t stop breaking things!”

Nope snarled and clamped his jaws around a Trojan’s ankle. The dead guy raised his sword, but I managed to turn at an awkward angle, still tangled in the leash, and stab him first.

Unfortunately, that left my back exposed. Two more corpses piled on top of me like they wanted a piggyback ride. They could’ve easily stabbed me, but

they didn’t seem interested in that. Instead, they each wrapped a cold, desiccated hand around my neck.

As soon as their flesh made contact, a flood of emotions washed over me.

I crumpled to my knees, sobbing uncontrollably, and slipped into a fever dream.

When I looked up, I was no longer in Queens. I knelt on a barren, battle-scarred hillside. To my right, the city of Troy was burning. The walls were cracking like eggshells. Towers crumbled into the inferno.

On the plain below me, Achaean troops were dragging enslaved Trojans toward their ships in the distance. I understood this would be my fate, too.

My ankles and wrists were bound with iron shackles. But I didn’t care about myself.

Lying in front of me was the broken body of my last son—my beautiful boy, whom the Greeks had slain like all my other children. They had taken everything from me: my husband, my family, my city, my hope.

My grief turned to rage. I snarled at my captors. I frothed at the mouth.

My eyes started to burn, flames singeing my eyebrows. My teeth elongated into fangs. The iron shackles slipped from my wrists as my hands narrowed into the paws of a black hound.

I was about to lunge at the nearest soldier when Annabeth’s voice broke through my nightmare. “Percy!”

“KILL THE GREEKS!” I yelled, sitting up in a daze.

The dreamscape was gone. Annabeth and Grover had dispatched the last of the undead warriors. Nope licked my face, trying to help, but rage and grief clung to me like a bad case of motion sickness.

“I … ugh.” I crawled to the curb and threw up, as you do when you’re a hero.

Even Nope didn’t want any part of that. He hid behind Annabeth’s legs.

Grover put his hand on my shoulder. “You okay there, buddy?”

I shuddered. “Did we get them all?”

“The Trojans? Yeah. But Hecuba got away.”

“What happened to you?” Annabeth asked me. No judgment in her tone, just concern.

I told them what I’d seen and felt. “I was Hecuba,” I said. “I don’t think she’s trying to kill anyone. She just wants to make them feel her pain.”

Annabeth frowned. “Thousands of years of grief, thinking about how her children died. Poor Hecuba—”

“Who is presently terrorizing Queens,” Grover said. “And wasting perfectly good food.”

“You’re a vegetarian,” I reminded him.

He looked offended. “There are *vats* of innocent tzatziki sauce in that restaurant! Tzatziki sauce!”

I was too weak to argue. Annabeth and Grover helped me stand. Nope supportively peed on my shoe.

“So we failed,” I said. “We didn’t even get to try our cute puppy bait.”

Nope whimpered. I guess he didn’t like the word *bait*.

“The night’s not over,” Annabeth said. “I get the feeling Hecuba won’t stop until she’s worn-out or—”

Right on cue, from a few blocks over, a new round of screaming shattered the evening calm.

“Can you walk?” Grover asked me.

I replied by running toward the screaming, as you do when you're a hero and you're done throwing up.

F I F T E E N

I Fail at Dog Diplomacy

Our next lucky winner in the Terrorize a Greek Establishment contest was Papou's Pastries.

Papou himself was out front. At least, I assumed he was the owner. He was a grandfatherly guy with a helmet of white hair, a splotchy apron wrapped around his belly, and meaty arms swinging a push broom toward a mob of dead Trojans while he screamed at them in Greek.

Grover stumbled to a stop. “Looks like he’s got things under control.”

“Rats!” Papou howled at us in English, maybe looking for sympathy. “I can’t have rats in my bakery!”

He had a point. The undead come and go, but the New York City Department of Health is forever. Rats would get his kitchen shut down immediately.

“We’ll take care of it, sir,” Annabeth promised.

She pulled out her dagger and started weaving among the undead, stabbing them one by one. This was impressive and all, but it made it difficult for me to help her. My sword was better at slashy-slashy than stabby-stabby, and I did not want to slashy-slashy Annabeth. That would make her mad.

Grover waded in with hooves of fury. Nope barked and bit undead ankles. After my last experience, I didn’t want to touch any cursed flesh, but I used Riptide’s hilt to bash some Trojan noses (which sounds like the name of a really bad punk band).

Annabeth yelped as an undead hand brushed her neck. She crumpled, which was enough to send me into slashy-slashy mode. As Grover dragged Annabeth to safety, I showed the Trojans the sharp edge of my ballpoint pen

… and wow, I really need to come up with some better heroic expressions.

Once all the Trojans were dust, I rushed to Annabeth’s side.

“I’m fine,” she said, though her legs wobbled when she tried to stand.

Grover locked eyes with me, clearly worried, but when Annabeth says she’s fine, you have to respect that, at least until she’s ready to talk about it.

She did seem to recover a lot quicker than I did.

Papou held his broom at attention and gave us a warrior’s salute. “You are excellent rat killers.”

“Thanks,” Annabeth said.

“Would you like some baklava? I don’t think the rats got into it.”

“Yes!” Grover said.

“Nope!” said Nope.

“Thank you, maybe another time,” Annabeth told him.

Papou frowned. “But you will not tell the health department?”

“They wouldn’t believe us,” I said.

Papou nodded with the wisdom of a New York shopkeeper who has seen it all. “True. They were very big rats.”

“Come on,” Annabeth told us; then she darted around the side of the building.

I wasn’t sure where she was going, but, hey, alleys were apparently my superpower. When Grover and I caught up with her, she was climbing the rungs of a fire-escape ladder.

How she bounced back so quickly, I didn’t know. I was still queasy from my puke-trip to Troy. I also didn’t understand what Annabeth was planning.

Surely Hecuba wouldn’t still be hanging out on the roof. She must have already moved on to her next target ….

Nevertheless, I picked up Nope, draped him over my shoulders like a fuzzy travel pillow with poor bladder control, and started to climb.

When we got to the roof, I found—shocker!—Annabeth was right.

Hecuba was still holding court on top of Papou’s Pastries in all her shaggy, red-eyed glory.

The hellhound looked conflicted, if hellhounds can look that way. She paced back and forth, alternately growling, whining, and pawing the roof as she sniffed the air.

“She smells Nope,” I guessed, shifting the pup into my arms.

At Sal’s Souvlaki, Hecuba must have been too busy to notice the puppy between the scintillating smells of roasted lamb, terrorized mortals, and dead Trojans. Now she eyed us suspiciously—half-angry, half-intrigued—

as little Nope squirmed in my arms and peed.

“Hey, Hecuba.” I tried to speak calmly, which wasn’t easy in my present state of urine-soaked nausea. “This is Nope. He needs a hellhound mom.”

Nope whined and kicked at my stomach, making clear what he really needed was a quick exit.

I took another step toward Hecuba. “You did a great job of scaring those

—those terrible Greeks. I think they really felt your pain. I know *I* did.”

Hecuba snarled.

Grover’s face told me that I didn’t want a translation of what Hecuba was saying. Annabeth nodded at me to keep going. She held Hecuba’s leash behind her back, but I didn’t want anybody trying to attach it to Hecuba’s collar until the hellhound calmed down a little more … *if* she calmed down.

I tried to remember how I talked to Mrs. O’Leary. It seemed so natural with my own hellhound friend. With Hecuba it was more like … well, like talking to Hera, a godly queen who didn’t much like me and could also maul me to death.

“We really miss you at home,” I said. “I’m sure Gale is worried about you, wherever she is. And if you’re still gone when Hecate gets back, she’ll be really sad.”

More growling. I sensed that Hecuba had mixed feelings about her housemates.

“I know you’re probably enjoying your freedom,” I said. “I get that. But I found this poor puppy abandoned on the streets. And I thought … I thought about you. Such a good mother to your own kids. You suffered so much when they … you know, when they died. I thought you’d understand how to take care of this poor little guy.”

Nope whimpered. I imagine my pee-soaked pants were really helping to spread his scent around.

Grover stepped next to me. He whispered to Nope in a few soft whines, most likely saying *This big, bad, scary hellhound will not kill you, probably! She might adopt you!*

This would not have calmed me down, but it seemed to help Nope. He stopped struggling quite so much.

Hecuba licked the air, then raised her snout as if to say, *Bring it here. It looks tasty.*

“I’ll take him,” Annabeth said.

“Um …” If anyone got bitten in half by Hecuba, I wanted it to be me, not Annabeth, but she didn’t ask my opinion. She cradled the pup, while at the same time passing me Hecuba’s leash on the down-low. “When she’s calm enough,” she whispered. “Be cool about it.”

“Uh …” I said.

Annabeth bounced Nope in her arms, cooing and calling him a good boy.

Hecuba sniffed and growled, watching.

“Annabeth’s smart,” Grover murmured. “She’s modeling being a loving mom. That should make Hecuba jealous.”

“Is that a good thing?” I asked.

“Watch,” Grover said.

Annabeth approached Hecuba and let her sniff the pup. Nope’s butt?

Check. Nope’s face? Check. Drool, pee, earwax? Everything appeared to be in order. Nope squirmed, careful not to meet Hecuba’s eyes, but he seemed to be warming up to the big mama beast.

“There, now.” Annabeth glanced back at me. “What good dogs.”

Oh, right. That was my cue.

Grover and I moved closer.

For a moment, we all stood together like one big, happy, strange family.

Maybe it was just an echo of my fever dream, but I felt like my own grief was unknotting. A hellhound-size lump of sadness that had been twisted in my chest was finally starting to loosen.

I realized how much pain Hecuba had been holding on to over the centuries. She’d only been able to express herself in growls, howls, and the occasional raising of the dead. Now, maybe she could remember the good parts of being a mom … the joy of caring for somebody small and cute—a son.

I caught a glance from Grover. He was beaming at me like, *See?*

Annabeth will make a great mom!

Dude, I thought. *One thing at a time. I’m still working on college applications.*

But I couldn’t deny the feeling. It was nice to be gathered around little Nope, protecting him and showing him love, though I wasn’t going to sniff his butt. Sorry. I have limits.

Finally, Hecuba stuck her muzzle in Annabeth’s face and pushed her back a step. The message seemed to be *Back off, Fake Mom. I got this.*

“Okay, no problem,” Annabeth said. “I’ll just let Percy …”

She handed Nope back to me, while giving me a look that said *NOW.*

I really don’t know what she expected of me. Maybe hand-eye coordination? I guess I was supposed to take Nope with one hand while cleverly moving in to attach Hecuba’s leash to her collar, all while making gentle cooing sounds and not letting on that I had an ulterior motive.

She should have known better. I can’t even chew gum and breathe underwater at the same time. Believe me, I tried. I ended up swallowing both the gum and the salt water.

I cradled Nope in my left arm and found the end of the leash with my right hand. I managed to click it into place on Hecuba’s collar, but I wasn’t exactly subtle about it.

I put just enough tug on Hecuba’s collar that she lurched back, realizing what I’d done, and fixed me with those big red eyes. *Did you just—?*

“Everything’s fine,” Annabeth promised the dog.

“Coo!” Grover added.

Everything was not fine, or coo.

Enraged all over again, Hecuba reared like a horse. She took off across the roof. Unfortunately, the other end of her leash was wrapped around my wrist, so I got yanked along, desperately holding on to Nope.

I was pulled off my feet. A dark portal swirled at the edge of the roof, and as Hecuba jumped through it, Nope and I were sucked into the shadow-world.

S I X T E E N

Hellhounds! At the Disco

Ah, yes, waterskiing behind a hellhound through a nightmare landscape while holding a pee-prone puppy … Or, as we call it in the demigod business, just another Wednesday night.

I had shadow-traveled before. Mrs. O’Leary had taken me to some interesting places I never wanted to see again. My friend Nico di Angelo, son of Hades, also had the ability. He’d used it once to take me Christmas shopping in Florence. (Long story.)

But as I was dragged along behind Hecuba, I started to think that maybe Mrs. O’Leary and Nico had gone out of their way to shield me from the

worst effects of shadow-surfing.

I didn't remember the air being so cold, or the ride so bumpy. The shadows wrapped around me, clinging to my limbs like they were trying to pull the leash away. I had a bad feeling that if that happened, I would not be making it back to New York.

My ears filled with static—a scratchy, screeching chorus of noises that almost sounded like voices demanding my attention. *Look over here. Come this way. You don't really need your sanity, do you?*

At least Hecuba's leash was tightly wrapped around my wrist. Otherwise, I might have lost my grip both literally and figuratively. If Nope had tried to squirm free, I wouldn't have been able to hold on to him, but he seemed perfectly content to enjoy the ride. He sniffed and barked at the shadows with a joyful "Nope! Nope! Nope!"

I'd never understood how shadow-travel worked. Nico once told me that all the shadows in the world were connected like an ocean, but this didn't feel like any ocean I'd ever been in. My joints were turning to ice. The air was too thin to fill my lungs.

Just when I was afraid I might pass out, we popped back into the real world —or at least a German nightclub, which I'm not sure counts. Strobe lights pulsed. Music pounded. Pretty people in skimpy clothes and neon body paint packed the dance floor under a heavy cloud of vape smoke.

As Hecuba plowed through the room, we got lots of cries of "Huch! Ach!

Was zum Teuful?" But then the partyers started to cheer and clap, some holding up their phones to capture the moment. I guess that's what you do when a hellhound hits the dance floor.

Hecuba paused, maybe startled by her new fan club. Before I could get to my feet, she apparently decided she didn't like techno-pop, and we took off again into the shadows. I wondered if anybody in the club had gotten good footage of me—#GiantDogPullsStrangeKidThroughClub.

Almost immediately, we emerged from the shadows again, this time into an empty desert landscape—dry, hot air, a million stars in the sky, a rolling blanket of dunes that stretched to the horizon. It was beautiful, and just about the last place a son of the sea god would have any kind of power.

As our hellhound tour guide dragged me and Nope up the side of a sand dune, I croaked, “Hecuba, wait!”

She glanced back, her bared teeth gleaming like quicksilver.

“I wasn’t trying to trick you!” I said. “I just want to get you home safely.”

She howled—a mixture of rage and sorrow that would’ve broken my heart if my heart wasn’t so busy trying to climb out of my throat. It was the same sound I’d heard in my fever dream, right when Hecuba turned from human to canine, her whole identity shattered by grief.

“I get it,” I told her. “But Hecate needs you.”

Wrong thing to say. She yanked on the leash, and before I could say *No, please, anything but that*, she leaped through another shadow, dragging me down like we were plummeting into a mine shaft.

Next floor: swimwear and ladies’ lingerie.

No, seriously. We materialized inside an empty department store—I have no idea where. We charged through racks of clothing, which Nope seemed to find exciting. He yipped and bit at bikinis as we flew past them, while I did my best to get poked in the eye by every coat hanger in our path.

I tried to say “Stop!” but got a mouthful of lacy undergarment for my troubles. Then we plunged back into shadows.

Finally, we emerged on a rural hillside dotted with thornbushes and twisted trees. It was nearly dawn, and this time I could smell the sea. A broken stone wall stretched across the crest of the hill.

Hecuba stopped. I figured she’d just tired herself out. Then I saw the way she was staring at the wall. Something about it seemed familiar.

In the other direction, the land sloped down past a deserted road to a rocky, crescent-shaped beach. The ocean glinted in the moonlight. The landscape looked different than it had in my vision. Things change over the centuries. But I still recognized it.

“Troy,” I said. Or what used to be Troy. We were in Turkey, on the Aegean Sea.

Hecuba’s eyes glowed orange in the dark, making her look like a sad jack-o’-lantern. It seemed she had found her ultimate destination.

I decided maybe it was time for a peace offering. “I’m going to unhook your leash, okay?”

I wobbled over to her. I felt so nauseated I probably would have thrown up if I hadn’t already emptied my stomach at the souvlaki shop. I’m clever that way. Always planning ahead.

Hecuba didn’t flinch. She just stared at the sea.

I unclipped the leash and put down Nope. He sniffed the dirt, shook off a bra that had gotten wrapped around his back leg, then went exploring. I hoped I wasn’t making a huge mistake, letting both hellhounds roam free, but it seemed like the right thing to do.

“This is where it happened,” I said to Hecuba. “Where you lost your children.”

She didn’t look at me, but her nostrils quivered. She licked her lips, swallowed, and made a deep rumbling sound in her chest.

I sat next to her. I remembered something about dogs feeling less threatened if you were lower than they were. I couldn’t imagine a hellhound of Hecuba’s size being threatened by me even if I stood on tiptoes, but I thought it might put her at ease if I looked vulnerable.

Also, I *was* vulnerable. I was so tired and shaken from all the shadow-travel, my choices were to either sit down or pass out.

Nope nosed around, weaving in and out of the bushes. He startled himself when he found a pink bra we'd dragged with us from the department store. He barked at it. Then, having shown the undergarment who was the boss, he continued his explorations.

"My mom is having a baby," I told Hecuba.

I'm not sure why that bubbled up in my mind, but it got Hecuba's attention. She turned toward me, her eyes bearing down like heat lamps.

"I grew up an only child," I continued. "I was a lot of work for my mom.

You know how it is. Demigods."

Those hellhound eyes were giving me a sunburn.

"I can't imagine how much courage it took for her to have another kid," I said. "I'm worried for the baby. I mean, this kid won't be a demigod, but still … I've seen how dangerous the world is. I've lost friends. One time I lost my mom—thought she was gone forever. That was the worst feeling in the world."

I was rambling, but Hecuba hadn't bitten my head off yet. I decided maybe that was progress.

"Every time I lose someone," I said, "I get so angry … I want revenge.

But then I remember what my friends would want. The same thing my mom wants for me—to be happy. To find people who matter and hang on to them for as long as I can."

I picked up a smooth, round rock. For all I knew, it was a slingstone from the Trojan War.

"I can't go back in time," I said. "I can't recover the people I've lost. So I have to concentrate on the family I've still got. Not just my mom and stepdad, or the new baby. But also Annabeth. Grover. All my friends at Camp Half-Blood."

Nope padded up to Hecuba, sniffed her, and flopped down between her front paws.

Hecuba looked at the puppy, who was doing what puppies do best—

radiating sweetness, sending out a message on all channels: *I am adorable.*

Take care of me.

“You’ve got family, too,” I told Hecuba. “I know Hecate’s not perfect. It must get annoying the way she treats you like a pet. But I’ve also seen how she looks at you. You mean a *lot* to her. And Gale—I think she’d be really sad without you. And now there’s Nope ….”

Hecuba sniffed the pup’s head. Her demeanor was still sad and grieving, but she seemed calmer—no longer interested in destroying Greek restaurants or rampaging through discos.

“I can only imagine what you went through when Troy fell,” I confessed.

“But you can scare all the Greeks you want … It won’t heal the grief. It’s just chucking more wood into the fire. I think it’s better to find your pack and protect it.”

Hecuba growled.

“Okay,” I said. “Maybe *pack* isn’t the right word. I don’t know why Hecate turned you into a hellhound. Gods are weird. I have a friend whose

dad once turned her into a tree. Maybe Hecate saved you the only way she knew how. It’s not perfect, but it’s still love.”

Hecuba gazed at the ocean—a view she’d probably seen thousands of times when she was a mortal. She’d watched the Greek ships anchor off that coast, ready for war. She’d watched her children die in battle on that rocky beach before the walls of her doomed city.

Finally, she pressed her nose against the top of Nope’s head. She inhaled his scent like she was committing it to memory, making it a part of her.

Then she looked at me and tilted her head.

“Ready to go home to New York?” I asked. “You’d make a lot of people happy. And selfishly, I’d appreciate Hecate not killing me because I lost you.”

She put her paw on the leash.

“That’s fair,” I said. “No leash. When Hecate gets back, I’ll try to convince her to give you more freedom. We won’t mention the whole terrorizing-Astoria thing.”

Hecuba grunted. Maybe she was agreeing with me. Or maybe she was just saying *They deserved it.*

I managed to get to my feet. I gathered up the sleepy puppy. Hecate knelt and allowed me to climb onto her back.

“Let’s go home,” I said.

I’m not sure how we made it back. As soon as we passed into the shadow-world, I lost consciousness, but Hecuba must have made sure I didn’t fall off. The next thing I remember, I was staring at the glittery ceiling in the great room of the manse and Annabeth was tucking a blanket around me.

“Good job, hero,” she said. “I’m not even going to ask why you have a bikini bottom wrapped around your ankle.”

She kissed me on the forehead, breathing in deeply as if to memorize my scent like Hecuba had with Nope. I blacked out and dreamed of puppies, which was a lot better than my usual dreams.

S E V E N T E E N

Grover Gets Grounded

Kids, always remember to shadow-travel responsibly. If you overdo it, that post-shadow hangover is a KILLER. By the time Annabeth and Grover woke me up the next morning, it was already seven thirty. I should've been showered, dressed, and giving aspirin to my homework by then.

"You needed the sleep," Grover said. "So did they."

He pointed to Hecuba's dog bed. The queen of Troy was curled up and snoring, with Nope tucked contentedly up against her belly, making happy little yips in his sleep. Next time I saw Mrs. O'Leary, I owed her a large

chew toy. Without her, we never would've found the pup that brought home Hecuba.

"She was in no mood for a morning walk." Annabeth gestured to the front door, which was now reinforced with a vertical tabletop on duct-tape hinges. Nothing but the best security for us. "Really wore herself out last night. Here, eat and tell us what happened."

She'd made me breakfast: a bacon, egg, and cheese bagel sandwich. If I hadn't already been in love with her, that would've sealed the deal. Grover was also in love—with my sandwich—because he kept stealing bites while I told them about the Midnight Ride of Percy Jackson.

"Oh, a German nightclub!" Grover nodded vigorously. "Was it Berghain?

I've always wanted to go there."

I frowned. "I didn't figure you for a nightclub guy."

"Are you kidding? I can hoof-boogie with the best of them! I've still got that wedding-dress outfit from the Sea of Monsters, too." He sighed.

"Maybe someday."

I decided I didn't want to know any more about Grover's secret disco dreams at the moment. It was bad enough we'd probably have to cancel our Halloween party tomorrow. At some point today, unless we managed to solve all our problems, I would need to remind Grover to send warnings to all our friends not to come unless they wanted to watch us get incinerated.

But I didn't have the heart to bring that up right now.

"I don't suppose Gale turned up on her own?" I asked.

Annabeth shook her head. "That's your job for today. You and Grover."

My spirits lifted. "You mean …?"

“Afraid so,” she said. “I have to go to school. Dave, Hana, and I have a presentation I can’t get out of. I already Iris-messaged your mom, and she’s going to call AHS. You’re taking a sick day.”

“Awesome!”

“To find a polecat.”

“I’ll take it.”

“Well, good luck.” She kissed me. “I left some notes about Gale in the library.” Then she turned to Grover. “Keep an eye on him, okay, Mr.

Protector?”

Grover gulped down the last of my bagel sandwich. “Always.”

After Annabeth left, Grover and I got ready for our day. He cleaned up breakfast by eating everything that was left. I fed the eels, showered in an antigravity bathroom (don’t ask how that went), got dressed, and headed into the library.

The Room of Dangerous Knowledge did not disappoint. It was shaped like a trident: three vast halls of floor-to-ceiling ebony bookshelves with a statue of Hecate at the intersection because … Oh, right, goddess of the crossroads. I see what she did there. Iron candelabras hung from the vaulted ceiling, illuminating the room with guttering torchlight. Flames and books seemed like a bad combo, but what did I know? At least Grover’s strawberry rampage hadn’t made it this far into the mansion.

The books went on forever—leatherbound spines, gilt titles, fancy silk bookmark ribbons. I kind of expected to find a guy in a smoking jacket sitting in an overstuffed chair and holding a pipe. But it was just me and the statue in the room.

None of the books called out to me, tempting me with secret spells or forbidden wisdom. They probably saw it was just Percy Jackson and decided to save their breath.

On the nearest table, next to a pile of books, Annabeth had left a yellow legal pad scribbled with notes. I'd never understood how Annabeth could be just as dyslexic as me and still have legible handwriting. Mine looked like cuneiform chiseled by a drunk Sumerian. I was grateful that she'd left me such a helpful cheat sheet, though.

According to the notes, Gale had been a mortal witch back in ancient times. (I knew that.) She had terrible personal hygiene and gas. (I smelled

that.) She'd been a seller of potions and magical fragrances and had somehow gotten on Hecate's bad side, possibly because she was a terrible spokesperson for magic, what with the constant farting and all. (Just a guess.) In a rage, Hecate turned her into a polecat, but then took pity on her and decided to keep her around. In the margin of one page, Annabeth had scrawled some questions: *Potions? Fragrances? Anti-gas medicine?*

Chickens?

I imagined those were the things she thought Gale might go after now that she was free. Maybe Grover and I should wander around Manhattan with a package of Gas-X and a dead chicken and see what happens, I thought.

I was staring at the nearest bookshelf, thinking about our polecat problem, when something caught my eye. On one of the shelves, covered in glass, was a display of papers and small shiny objects.

I walked over to check it out. Books might not have much power over me, but I'm a sucker for small shiny objects.

On the left side of the display were yellowed pamphlets with old-timey lettering with titles like *Practickal forcery* and *Potionf for Beginnyng Uferf*.

In the middle, a flyer for *HECATE'S SCHOOL OF MAGIC, 1913–14*

Academic Year had been ripped to pieces, then matted and framed that way, as if Hecate wanted to memorialize the moment of rage when it was shredded. On the right was a collection of old seeing devices—binoculars, monocles, some contact lenses preserved in a bottle of solution, and half a

dozen pairs of children's eyeglasses. Yeah. Not creepy at all. Under this collection was a brass plaque engraved with WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN.

I lifted the top of the display case. I picked up a pair of blue-framed glasses that were snapped in half at the bridge. They were the same ones I'd seen in my vision of the child pedaling away from the manse in terror. On the right stem, the initials SEJ were monogrammed in gold.

I felt like I had shadow-traveled into a block of ice. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. *SEJ*. I knew those initials.

Chiron had tried to warn me. Ghosts seemed to crowd around me—not just the spirits of the dead, but the memories and regrets entombed in this little display. I managed to put the glasses back. I couldn't process what this meant right away. It was already Thursday morning. We had a polecat to find, a mansion to repair, and only forty-eight hours before Hecate came home ….

I backed out of the library, doing my best not to break into a run.

"What's wrong?" Grover asked when I joined him in the great room.

"You look like—"

"Don't say *like you've seen a ghost*," I pleaded.

He studied my expression. I knew he could sense my fear and confusion, but he didn't press the issue. "Okay … Did you learn anything? About Gale?"

I nodded weakly. I did my best to shelve my unanswered questions and anxiety inside a glass case in the back of my mind. I told Grover what I'd read in Annabeth's notes.

Grover scratched his goatee. "Fragrances or medicine for gas … We need to narrow things down or we'll never find her."

I looked over at the sleeping hellhounds. I had a feeling they wouldn't be joining us on this particular hunt. I also wasn't too worried about Hecuba

trying to escape again. If my experience with Mrs. O'Leary was any guide, Hecuba and Nope would be asleep all day. I just wished I could join them.

"So, we walk around town with chicken carcasses, then?" I asked.

Grover looked troubled, like Annabeth's comment about being a protector was still replaying in his mind. "No. I have a—well, maybe not a *better* idea, but one that might work. Come on."

He grabbed the house keys.

"Where we going?" I asked.

"I need to ground myself," he said. "Just for a few minutes."

He led me across the street to Gramercy Park.

I wasn't sure what Grover had in mind. Maybe he just needed a moment to focus his thoughts in a natural environment. Peaceful spots like that are tough to find in Manhattan.

I didn't realize that when he'd said *ground himself*, he'd meant literally cover himself with the ground. He sat down in a flower bed and started to heap leaves and dirt over his legs.

"Um … you good there, G-man?"

He closed his eyes like he wanted to be at one with the bark mulch.

"Yes," he muttered, trancelike. "Preparing for squirrels. Need silence, please."

That totally cleared things up.

I sat on the nearest bench and waited. If anyone walked past, I'd have had a hard time explaining why my friend was digging himself a fort, but

we had the park to ourselves.

The morning air was cool and crisp. The leaves were turning from gold to red. Under other circumstances, I would've been happy to enjoy my

"sick day" hanging out with my best friend, but last night's trip was still making my stomach churn. I felt like I'd ingested some shadows along with a few lacy undergarments. My short visit to Hecate's library hadn't helped, either.

After a few minutes, Grover was almost completely buried up to the waist. I was getting worried. I wanted to say something like *Can I get you anything? More leaves? More dirt?*

Then the squirrels began to arrive. Three scrambled down the nearest tree trunk and hopped onto Grover's back. Another raced out of the bushes and leaped onto his shoulder. Two more tunneled through the leaves and skittered up Grover's legs. Within a minute, there were dozens, maybe hundreds. Honestly, I had no idea. I'd never had to count squirrels in numbers that high before.

Grover's torso disappeared under a tidal wave of chittering fur and twitching bushy tails. Somewhere in the mix of brown and gray, I spotted one very large black rat, who quickly disappeared in the sea of its squirrely comrades.

"Er, Grover …?"

One of the squirrels turned and barked at me like, *Silence, human!*

Apparently, the park's vegetation wanted in on the fun. The nearest tree roots started snaking toward Grover. Vines wrapped around his chest. Tree branches bent and swayed, trying to reach him.

Grover's eyes rolled back in his head. He started to shake. I couldn't take it anymore.

"Okay, that's enough," I decided.

I marched over, ready to kick some squirrel posterior in my usual heroic fashion, but the party ended on its own. The squirrels broke formation and scattered in every direction. The rat was the last one to leave the sinking satyr. It waddled off into the bushes with one last disapproving glance at me over its shoulder.

“Grover?” I knelt next to him. The vines and branches retreated. I brushed away the dirt and leaves and was shocked to find that Grover had descended about half a foot into the ground, like the earth had been trying to swallow him.

“Hey, buddy.” I shook his shoulder gently.

His eyes fluttered open.

“Oh. Hi.” He blinked groggily. “I’m still here. Good.”

“Wait, what?”

He sat up. “Nothing. Just … Wow. That was a lot.”

“What just happened?”

He wouldn’t meet my eyes. “I told you. I got grounded. Tried to find Gale by connecting with … well, everything alive on Manhattan. Except for humans. You all don’t really count. No offense.”

“You can do that?”

“I mean, yes ….”

There was a lot to process here. Like, why had Grover never told me about this before? Why was he acting so cagey about it? Had he learned anything?

But since I’m ADHD, the first question out of my mouth was “What’s the deal with the rat? You had, like, a million squirrels and one rat.”

“Oh, that’s just Eustis,” Grover said. “He’s adopted.”

Let it go, Percy, I told myself.

“So, are you okay?” I asked. “That looked painful.”

“I’m fine.” He was lying. You can’t share an empathy link with somebody and not know when something is hurting them. “I got some information. Turns out there aren’t many polecats in Manhattan. Skunks, yes, but not polecats. When one is running around wild, the other animals tend to notice. The last time one was seen was Tuesday, on Lafayette Street.”

I tried to picture where he was talking about. “Like in Chinatown?”

“I don’t know how far downtown,” he admitted. “But Lafayette starts around Ninth Street, right? We could head down there, just start walking south.”

It sounded like as good a plan as any.

I also kind of appreciated the randomness of it. An Annabeth plan would have been more effective, more targeted, and more logical. But *just start walking* was the kind of thinking I could support.

I helped him up. We went to check on the hellhounds and found them still sleeping. Leaving them alone wasn’t optimal, but nothing about this week had been optimal. We put out fresh food, told the eels we’d be back, and headed downtown.

SODNYC was on our route, and I stopped and left a message with Annabeth’s dorm advisor so when Annabeth got out of class, she’d have some idea of where we were going.

We continued walking. Every now and then I glanced at Grover, who seemed even shakier than I’d felt after all my shadow-travel. A few times he stumbled, and once I caught his arm.

“Are you sure—?”

“I’m fine,” he insisted.

“You won’t have to, uh, ground yourself again when we get closer, will you?”

He laughed weakly. “No. That would be … No.”

I stopped, took him by the shoulders, and made him look me in the eye.

“Grover, what aren’t you telling me? Why haven’t I ever seen you do that before, with the squirrels and everything?”

He hesitated. I got the feeling he was about to faint.

“Come.” I sat him down on the nearest bench, which happened to be outside a bakery. It wasn’t Papou’s Pastries, but the stuff inside smelled pretty good. “Wait here a sec.”

I went in and bought a slice of strawberry cheesecake for Grover, plus a couple of ice teas. I figured food might help him get his energy back.

As he nibbled his cake, I said, “Okay. Tell me.”

He shrugged listlessly. “It’s just … grounding myself like that? It’s pretty powerful magic. I can only do it because I’m a Cloven Elder.”

Grover was too modest. He rarely talked about it, but after the Battle of Manhattan, he’d been promoted to the council of the three most important satyrs in the world, which in my mind made him an elite boss.

“It’s dangerous?” I guessed.

“Oh … nothing I’d worry about,” he said. “Not a big deal. It’s just when I do that, when I connect with nature on that level, there’s always a small chance …”

“Yes?”

He nibbled more cheesecake. “That I might dissolve into nothing.”

E I G H T E E N

I Smell Trouble™, a New Fragrance for Men Call me alarmist, but the idea of my friend dissolving into nothing seemed like a pretty big deal to me.

I expressed this in my usual calm way.

“WHAT?!” I shouted, and made the nearest fire hydrant explode (accidentally, mind you). The top of the hydrant shot into the air like a billionaire’s rocket, somersaulted a few times, and landed in the middle of Eighth Street.

“Grover—”

“I know.”

“Do you?” I paced back and forth, trying to contain my horror. A manhole cover by my foot blew open. “How could you? Why?”

“Can you sit down before you destroy any more city property?”

I paced back and forth a few more times before I was composed enough to join him on the bench. By then he had finished his cheesecake and both ice teas, because he eats when he’s nervous, or when he’s not nervous, or just when there’s food in the vicinity.

“Look, Percy …” He started picking at his fingers. His nails were more ragged than I’d noticed in a while. His goatee quivered. “I feel so bad about Hecate’s place …. I’m responsible.”

“Dude. You’re *not*.”

He gave me the sad eyes, the trembling lower lip. We could have been right back in sixth grade, when he used to hide at the back table of the cafeteria after getting bullied by the other kids at Yancy Academy.

“Except … maybe I am,” he said. “I was thinking Monday night, before everything went wrong … if you get this letter of recommendation, there’ll only be one more to go. Then you’ll be ready for college. And you and Annabeth will be gone. And I’ll … I’ll still be here.”

That hit me like a fastball in the stomach. All the anger got knocked right out of me, leaving nothing but guilt.

“Grover. Ah, man, we’d never *leave you* leave you. You can come out to stay anytime. And we’ll be back.”

He sniffled. “I know. It’s just … I hate it. I’ll miss you two. And it’s selfish, so I haven’t said anything. I want to help. I really do. But part of me wonders … maybe that’s why I drank that strawberry potion.

Subconsciously, maybe, but still … just to sabotage things. What if I did that? I couldn’t live with myself.”

I counted to five. I didn't want to jump in too fast, because I got the feeling another denial wouldn't help and I'd just end up flipping more manhole covers.

"We should've talked about this before now," I said. "That's on me. I should've realized how hard this has been on you, man."

He wiped a tear from his cheek. "It's not your fault."

"Don't do that," I said, gently as I could. "Don't brush it away."

"The tear?"

"No, dude, the importance of what you're telling me. Look, I don't know what happened with the strawberry potion. I don't know if Hecate was setting you up to fail or what. But I *do* know that nothing on earth is worth losing my best friend. We'll figure this out. Just please, no more grounding yourself. I'm the one who should be apologizing. I should have been thinking about how you felt rather than stressing about getting into college."

He sniffled. "Well … you *should* stress about college a little."

"Thanks, man."

"Because I've seen your GPA."

"Just come here." I wrapped him in a hug. He smelled like dirt, dried leaves, and probably squirrels and an adopted rat named Eustis, but fortunately my nose wasn't that good. "Promise me no more grounding."

He nodded. "It … it was kinda cool, though, right?"

"Very impressive," I said. "And terrifying."

"Okay. Annabeth is going to kill me, isn't she?"

We didn't even discuss not telling her, because that was a recipe for disaster.

“She might kill you a little,” I agreed. “But in a loving, caring way. And she’ll tell you the same thing I did. Nothing is worth losing you. You are always going to be with us, even if we’re temporarily living on different coasts.”

His smile started to crumble. I was afraid I’d made him sad again, but then his eyes brightened like he’d realized something important.

“Different coasts!” he said. “The squirrels said something about the coast

….”

“Like, the squirrels are from California?”

“No. They said … It’s hard to translate. They said the polecat was last seen with four spirits from beyond the coast. Something like that.”

“You just remembered this?”

He frowned. I was glad to see him annoyed with me, because that was better than him being sad and wanting to dissolve into dirt. “No, Percy, but I’ve never grounded myself before. It’s a little hard to hear the voices of everything alive in Manhattan all at once. I’m surprised I could even pick out the idea *Lafayette Street*.”

“That’s fair. So, these four spirits … any ideas?”

“It—it doesn’t exactly make sense. Usually, to a squirrel, a spirit from beyond the coast would mean a *naiad*, a water spirit, but we’re not going anywhere near a natural body of water.”

I sat up a little straighter. “Well, my school’s not very close to the water, and I’ve got a Nereid from the deep sea as my guidance counselor. At least, I *did* before she disappeared on me. If there are naiads involved, that’s good, right? Water is kind of my thing.”

“I mean, yeah, I hadn’t thought of that.”

I patted him on the shoulder. “Come on, Cloven Elder. You may have just saved the day.”

As we started down Lafayette Street again, I was in a much better mood.

My friend wasn’t turning into dirt. We had a solid lead on finding Gale. And Grover seemed to enjoy being called Cloven Elder. My thoughts started rambling, as they do. I wondered if I should call him CE for short. Did that mean before he became a Cloven Elder he was Grover BCE?

This is how my mind works. Welcome to the chaos.

We took our time, partly because Grover was still shaky from his communion with nature. Also, I was trying to stay alert for anything water-spirity in our vicinity. I got nothing except a vague sense that my bladder was full, which wasn’t helpful.

We crossed Houston Street. As we made our way through Nolita, I got the usual tingle of agitation I felt whenever I headed to this part of downtown. The buildings were too low, the sky too open, the streets no longer on a nice simple grid. I felt like the parts of Manhattan I knew best—

Uptown, Midtown—had run away to hide like the citizens of some Wild West town right before the big gunfight at high noon.

On the corner of Jersey Street, we passed our first perfume shop. The smells wafting out made my eyes water, as if millions of flower bouquets were crying out in terror all at once. The next block had three more perfume shops. The pedestrians walking down the street even smelled perfumy, like they’d been browsing the stores and getting spritzed with free samples.

Grover sneezed.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “What’s with all the smelly stuff?”

“This area has the highest concentration of perfume shops in the world,”

he said. “I try not to come down here because it kills my sinuses.”

I stopped. “Fragrances.”

Grover’s eyes widened. “And we’re searching for Gale, the smelliest polecat in the world. That can’t be a coincidence. You think she’s hiding down here to camouflage her scent?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe. But what do naiads have to do with it?”

Grover had no answers, and I wasn’t going to let him summon an army of squirrels to find out. Instead, we kept going, paying more attention to the perfume shops.

Once you noticed them, you couldn’t unsee them. They were everywhere, like the gold and jewelry businesses along East 47th Street. It never made sense to me why all the shops for a single commodity would be crammed together like that. Wouldn’t you get gold fatigue looking at so many jewelry places at once? Wouldn’t your nose fall off if you tried to sniff all these different perfumes in one trip? Then again, I’d never understood how anyone could operate *any* business in Manhattan without going broke. I mentally crossed off *open a surf shop* from my list of potential future careers.

Another block, and I froze. Across the street stood yet another perfumery.

This one’s doorway was gold-plated and decorated with Greek key patterns, which seemed like a clue that something magical and Greek might be going on inside. The windows were filled with colored vials of every size and shape and a big water fixture that bubbled liquids through pipes. Dry ice smoked from a large cauldron. Maybe it was their Halloween display? Or maybe it was like that all the time. The name of the place glittered in pearly white over the door: AEAEA. I guess they’d spent all their money on the

storefront decorations and hadn’t been able to afford any consonants for their sign.

“What is it?” Grover asked.

“Not sure,” I said. “The name of that place mean anything to you?”

Grover tried to pronounce it. “It looks like something Hephaestus might scream when he drops a hammer on his foot.”

I really hoped Hephaestus hadn’t heard Grover’s comment, because we didn’t need another god mad at us.

“Something feels … off,” I said.

Then I noticed the woman behind the sales counter, talking with a customer. She looked like a typical salesperson in a high-end store. She wore an elegant deep blue dress and gold dangle earrings. Her dark hair was cut in a kind of Cleopatra-style wedge. She smiled at her customer coolly, all aloof and fashionable, like she was sending the message *Buy my products, and maybe you’ll look as beautiful as I do.*

Something about her was familiar … like we were standing in the same river, the current running straight from her to me.

“She’s a naiad,” I said.

Grover nodded. “You’re right. I can sense it now. Wow, you’re good.”

“What do we do now? Go ask nicely if she’s seen a farting polecat?”

“If you can sense *her*,” Grover said, stepping back, “do you think she can sense you?”

I wished he hadn’t said that. I think it made me send out extra sea-god-kid radiation or something. The lady turned and looked out the window as if she’d heard somebody call her name.

Our eyes locked. Her face turned into a mask of pure hatred. She said something to her client—probably *Excuse me, I have to kill someone.* Then she snatched up a few perfume samples and marched straight toward us.

N I N E T E E N

Oops! … I Killed You Again

The naiad stormed out of her store and across the street, ignoring a honking cab and a swerving delivery truck. I didn’t like the many vials she carried in either hand, or the murderous look on her face. She was definitely targeting me, not Grover.

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“Maybe step away from me,” I told him. “If she starts splashing that stuff around—”

“Not happening.” Grover stood firm, his fists clenched, like today was his day to laugh in the face of death, squirrels, and also perfume.

I deliberated whether to draw my sword. I didn’t want to escalate things.

Also, swords aren’t much good at repelling liquids. I had other ways to do that.

The woman stopped at the curb a few feet away from us.

She snarled, “You shall not pass!”

“Wait, I know that line,” I said. “It’s from the wizard guy in Lord of the Rings.”

She momentarily lost her murderous look in confusion. “What?”

“What?” I repeated.

“Maybe it’s the other wizard,” Grover offered. “From that other movie.”

“No, I’m pretty sure it’s—”

“Percy Jackson!” the woman howled. “How dare you show your face here!”

“Oh, good, you know me,” I said. “Well, uh, Ms. Aye-aye-aye—”

“What?” she demanded again.

“What?” I asked. “Isn’t that your name?”

My plan to confuse her until her head exploded was going well. She looked at me, then back at the sign on her storefront, then at Grover, as if wondering how a reasonable-looking satyr could hang out with someone so dense.

“My name is Filomena,” she said, her jaw clenched. “Aeaea was my home island. But you don’t even *remember*, do you?”

“Oh. Um …”

“He totally remembers!” Grover offered. “He never forgets a friendly face! He told me all about you. You helped him on … Aeaea! When he was on the island of Aeaea, which is where you’re from.”

He nodded so vigorously I worried his horns would fall off. Maybe he thought he could make her believe him through sheer enthusiasm.

“I never helped him,” she snarled. “I was *not* his friend.”

“Oh, he never forgets an enemy face, either!” Grover said. “That’s what I meant to say.”

Filomena wagged her finger at me, which couldn’t have been easy while holding a bunch of vials. “My sisters and I won’t tolerate your interference.

If you think you’ll deprive me of my turn with the weasel—”

“Your turn?” I asked. “Sisters?”

“It’s not a weasel,” Grover muttered, but I elbowed him to be quiet.

“Where is Gale?” I asked.

“Wouldn’t you like to know!” she screamed.

“That’s … kind of what I just said. Sorry, how do you know me? I can tell I offended you at some point, and I apologize for that, but I offend so many people—”

“BAH!” She threw a fistful of vials at our feet.

My first instinct was to put myself between Grover and danger. Grover’s first instinct was to put himself between me and the same danger. We ended up running into each other and both being directly in the splash zone. Five

different fragrances splattered us from the waist down. A noxious purple fog started to rise around us. I recovered my senses, yelled, “Aeaea!”

(because it was on my mind), and blasted the potion fog right back at Filomena.

“Ack!” she complained, now speckled head to toe in magical whatever-it-was. “How dare you!”

She burst into a fine rose-scented mist. The rest of her vials clanked on the asphalt and rolled into the nearest storm drain.

Grover and I looked at each other. Our legs were starting to smoke.

I cursed, then concentrated as hard as I could to pull every bit of potion off my friend. Droplets floated away from his cargo shorts and his fur like a cloud of bees. I must have gotten carried away, because sweat popped from his pores, too. Tears floated from his eyes. I threw the cloud of moisture at the pavement.

My blood was starting to hum. My skin burned. I closed my eyes and used my last bit of strength to expel the liquid from my system.

The next thing I knew, I was passed out on the sidewalk. Grover was shaking me.

“Hey, hey, wake up,” he said.

My eyes fluttered open. “What …? Are we still alive?”

“Thanks to you,” he said. “How do you feel?”

“Super thirsty.”

“Yeah. I think you dehydrated us. Here.” He handed me a Gatorade.

“Where did you get this?” I mumbled. “How long was I out?”

“About an hour.”

“What?!”

Just saying that made my lips crack. I had a throbbing headache. I decided just to sip my Gatorade.

Grover offered me eyedrops and some lip balm. “I’ve been trying to moisturize,” he said. “Thank goodness you dehydrated us right next to a drugstore.”

I grunted. Finding a drugstore in Manhattan wasn’t hard. Most city blocks had one. Grover and I sat together on the sidewalk and tried to get our moisture back from Sahara Desert level.

“Did Filomena …? Did I vaporize her?” I asked.

The naiad hadn’t exactly been friendly, but I still didn’t like the idea of accidentally sending her to the Great Water Faucet in the Sky, or wherever naiads went to reincarnate.

Grover shuddered. “She would’ve vaporized *us* if you hadn’t acted so quickly.”

I emptied the bottle of saline drops into my eyes. I felt like I’d spent the last hour staring into an oven.

“We need to figure out what she was talking about. She said she had sisters. She mentioned Gale. You think …?” I pointed to the perfumery.

“No one else has come out and tried to kill us,” Grover said. “But if Gale’s inside, we should check. Should we buy, like, protective gear first?

Raincoats? Umbrellas?”

He helped me to my feet.

“Nah,” I said. “Anyone else starts throwing potions, I’ll go full hurricane on them.”

Those sounded like fighting words. How heroic did I feel marching across the street and into Aeaea, ready for battle, only to find the place empty except for a college-age sales dude with green hair, typing away on his phone while humming along to an all-violin version of “So Yesterday”?

That’s right. I felt pretty heroic.

“Hey, I love this song!” Grover said.

“Shh,” I said. “I’m trying to be intimidating.”

I marched over to Green Hair, who looked up at me and sighed, then squinted at the door like there might be somebody more interesting coming in behind me. “I thought you were my boss. She left like an *hour* ago, and I’m supposed to go on lunch break.” He typed for another few seconds, then apparently remembered he was supposed to be working. He looked up and said, “Help you?”

Not in a friendly way. More like *Obviously you won’t be buying expensive perfume, kid; can you stop bothering me?*

“Your boss is Filomena,” I guessed.

“Afraid so.” He sighed. “Oh, please tell me you’re not a *friend* of hers.”

He said that as if it were physically impossible.

“Do her sisters work here?” I asked.

He was so shocked he actually put down his phone. “Are you kidding?

She has *sisters*? That is so sad for them.”

“I’ll take that as a no. And I don’t suppose you have a polecat in the store?”

“A what?” asked Green Hair.

“It’s a type of mustelid,” Grover pitched in. “Kind of like a weasel, but you can tell the difference from the hair pattern around their eyes.”

I suspected Green Hair's brain disconnected somewhere around the word *mustelid*.

"Um, no," he said. "No polecats."

I could've demanded to search the place, but I believed Green Hair was telling the truth. He seemed way too apathetic to spend energy lying. If he were secretly a monster, I wanted to encounter more monsters like this, who just didn't care, hated their job, and wanted to go on lunch break.

"Never mind," I said. "Has anything been … different in the store the last couple of days?"

Green Hair snorted. "You mean aside from our new product line?" He gestured toward a nearly empty display table. The only thing on it was a

little placard that read MIRACLE BY AEAEA.

"What's Miracle?"

"I don't know," complained Green Hair. "The last two days, it has sold out in, like, ten minutes. It's supposed to make you irresistible, but I've never even gotten a free sample."

I frowned at Grover. "You think that's what she doused us with?"

Green Hair snorted. "Filomena doused you with something? Not likely it was Miracle. That stuff is pricier than gold. You smell more like …" He wrinkled his nose. "Dry Number Two."

Of course I would get doused with Dry Number Two.

"So let me guess," I said. "Filomena started producing Miracle on Tuesday?"

Green Hair went back to his phone screen. "I guess. You would think having a new hit product would make her happy, but she's meaner than ever. Keeps grumbling about having to *share*."

Grover and I locked eyes. I was starting to think our polecat friend was being used for nefarious naiad capitalism, though I wasn't sure how.

"Who would Filomena share with?" I asked.

"Absolutely no one!" said Green Hair.

"She has competitors?"

"Everyone! But she *really* hates this place." Green Hair took a business card from his shirt pocket and showed me the name: FANCY WATER. "They're two blocks away. I keep this card handy so when she fires me I can go work there. That'll teach her."

"Someone she hates …" Grover mused. "Maybe a sister?"

"Bet you a vial of rose-scented dissolving fluid," I agreed. Then to Green Hair: "I'd go ahead and lock up for the day. I don't think Filomena will be back in time for your lunch break."

T W E N T Y

We Get Dangerously Fancy

Fancy Water had as much foot traffic as I would have expected from a perfume shop called Fancy Water … meaning none.

Grover and I watched the place from across the street. Nobody went in.

Nobody went out. No one looked at us funny. No polecats farted in our general direction.

The facade was more low-key than Aeaea's. Instead of big picture windows, the main entrance was all frosted glass. I couldn't see inside and had no idea what might be waiting to kill us and/or spritz us with fragrance.

I could, however, sense a water spirit close by. It wasn't something I normally would have noticed. Like, I don't walk down the street and see little glowing blue dots pop up like I'm playing a Pokémon game. But once I've been told to be on the lookout for water spirits, I can put myself in that frame of mind. When I get close enough, I can pick up their presence, like I've walked into a microclimate where the air pressure is a little different.

"A naiad's in there," I said. "You sense Gale at all?"

Grover frowned. "I don't have weasel radar."

"Polecat."

"Oh, stop."

I smiled. It felt good to get back to our normal banter, even if we were on a dangerous cologne-related stakeout.

I knew we should march right into the shop. The day was a-wasting, and a mustelid's life might be at stake. But still I hesitated. Maybe almost getting vaporized had made me wary. Or maybe I was learning to be careful as I got older. Nah, that probably wasn't it.

"I've been thinking about Gale's past," I said. "She was a mortal witch, right? Apparently really good at making potions."

Grover nodded. "So maybe she came down here looking for a place to hide out. Filomena figured out who she was. If Filomena offered her a job making … whatever Miracle is, Gale could be raking in the polecat bucks."

I considered that. "If Gale feels appreciated, she might not want to leave.

And if there are three more potion-throwing naiads involved …"

Grover shivered. "This could get ugly. You sure we don't want to buy some rain ponchos?"

I wished I knew more about Greek witchcraft. I usually tried to deal with such things by stabbing the magic-maker as quickly as possible and/or

running away. When it came to how fast a witch could zap, what they could zap you with, and how to prevent such zappage, I was in the dark.

“I don’t think waterproof clothes are going to be enough,” I decided. “It’s a store, right? Whoever’s in there, they won’t necessarily know who we are.

Let’s pretend to be customers.”

“Except Filomena recognized you.”

I frowned. “Right. And I have no idea where we met. Do you?”

Grover shook his head. “It seemed like she knew *you*, not me. I could go in alone.”

“No way.” I tried to think. It wasn’t easy without Annabeth to do ninety percent of it for me. “Let’s just bluff it out. We go in looking for a gift. If a naiad recognizes me, I’ll improvise.”

Grover scratched his horns. “Let me take the lead. Not to criticize your improv talents, but …”

“Fine,” I said. “We can do this.”

I said this not because I believed it, but because 1) I wanted it to be true, and 2) I was impatient and needed to do something, even if that something was dangerous.

We strolled across the street.

Grover pushed open the door, which made a chirpy electronic welcome beep. Inside, the Great Wall of Smell smacked me in the face—so much patchouli, ginger, and pumpkin that my eyes watered. Through the haze, I could make out a few glass display counters, two salon chairs, and behind the register in back, a lady reading a magazine. She looked a lot like Filomena, except her dark hair was longer. She wore a cosmetics lab coat over a pink dress and had tortoiseshell sunglasses covering her eyes, maybe because the smells in this place were so bright they hurt.

“Welcome,” she said, without looking up from her magazine. She sounded glum, like she was used to losing sales. “Let me know if I can help you with anything.”

“Thanks,” Grover said.

I scanned the shop. There were no polecats on duty. No raw chicken carcasses or bags of weasel wafers. The place was spare and kind of

depressing, but the sales lady was definitely a naiad. I could feel the water energy rolling off her like a river current. So far, she didn’t seem to sense me. I wanted to keep it that way.

Grover strode up to the counter, smiling. “I’m looking for a gift. For my girlfriend. She’s a juniper bush?”

The lady did a double take. I was across the room, pretending to browse, but out the corner of my eye I could see her reassessing Grover, realizing he was a satyr, and then switching into Greek-myth mode, like *Okay, you’re magical, I’m magical, let’s make a deal.*

“I see.” She gave him a cautious smile. “A juniper dryad! What’s the occasion? Is it her bloom day?”

“No, just an early Saturnalia present,” Grover said. “If I don’t do my holiday shopping ahead of time, I get overwhelmed.”

“Oh, I understand! Very thoughtful. Have you been in the shop before? I don’t remember you.”

“No, but I’ve heard great things. Grover Underwood, Cloven Elder.”

He put out his hand. After a moment of shock, she shook it.

“A Cloven Elder.” Her smile warmed to just above tepid. “It’s an honor.”

“And your name is … Fancy?” he guessed. “I’ve heard you make the *best* water.”

She pursed her lips like she was trying to stay polite and not yell at the VIP. My hand crept toward Riptide in case things went south, but Grover seemed to be selling his act as a harmless knucklehead, which was usually my role.

“Actually, it’s Silbe,” said the naiad.

“Sylvie.”

“No, Sil- *BEE*, with a *b*.”

“Of course,” Grover said. “That *is* much fancier. So, what would you recommend for my Juniper?”

“Well, let’s see.” Silbe scanned the display cases. “Juniper pairs well with citrus … say grapefruit or orange?”

“Citrus makes me sneeze,” said Grover.

A lot of things made Grover sneeze. It seemed to me he didn’t need to share that information. I was afraid he’d forgotten why we were here and we’d actually end up leaving with a Saturnalia gift.

“Right,” said Silbe. “Sneezing on her wouldn’t be very romantic!” Her eyes drifted to the case where I was standing and trying to eavesdrop

without being too obvious. Silbe’s eyes caught mine. Her expression frosted over with suspicion.

“You look familiar,” she said. “I’m sure we’ve met.”

“Hmm?” I mumbled. “Mm. Hmm …”

Eloquence is one of my superpowers.

“Oh, he tags along with me a lot,” Grover said. “He’s no one important.”

Ouch, I thought. But his tone seemed to do the trick. Silbe returned her attention to the display cases. “Well, perhaps another wood scent, like cypress.”

“That sounds nice,” Grover agreed. “Though I’ve heard there’s something new on the market. Something very exclusive. I’m pretty sure a friend of mine bought a bottle here recently. Something called Miracle?”

Silbe recoiled. “We don’t sell that here. Cheap imitation magic. You must be confusing me with my sister Filomena. If you’re in the market for shoddy goods like that, you can find her shop just down the—”

“Oh, my mistake!” Grover said quickly. “Sorry, sorry. My friend told me to *avoid* Miracle. I remember now. They said you had something much better.”

Silbe wavered. I could tell she was battling several different feelings: resentment, suspicion, but also the need to show off and make a sale.

“Miracle is a love-potion hoax,” she grumbled. “I would never waste my time on such an inferior recipe. My newest product is much more exclusive.

We only have a few vials left.”

She walked over to my display case, nearly backing me into the wall.

Grover gave me a panicked look, then trotted after her.

From the lowest shelf, Silbe pulled a small blue box. The lid was embossed in gold: SPELLBOUND.

“Ooh,” Grover said. “Fancy.”

“Indeed,” said Silbe. “An ancient recipe from one of the finest alchemists ever to mix potions. Rediscovered … well, just this week, in fact. It’s a Fancy Water exclusive.”

“How did you rediscover the recipe?” I asked.

I knew immediately that I’d made a mistake by speaking. Silbe’s eyes narrowed.

“That’s not important,” she said.

The air between us started to shimmer, water droplets collecting into a fine mist. Before we could start a miniature rainstorm, Grover intervened. “I

love this! How much?”

Silbe smiled. “For a Cloven Elder, I’m sure we can arrange the friends-and-forest discount. Only a thousand golden drachmas.”

Grover gulped. “What a deal.” He sounded like he’d been sucking helium. “Can you gift wrap it?”

“Of course,” said Silbe. “But first, you should really try the scent, to make sure your girlfriend will like it.”

She opened the box and produced a glowing blue vial with a spritz top.

She aimed it at Grover, who stepped back instinctively. “Um …”

“Oh, you’re right,” Silbe apologized. “You wouldn’t have the right chemistry profile for Spellbound. Your friend here is a better test subject.”

Before I could say *Blue’s not my color*, she spritzed me right in the face.

I admit it—she outplayed me. The stuff got in my nostrils, my eyes, my mouth. It tasted exactly like I imagined Gale’s weasel treats tasting, which wasn’t good.

“Look, lady,” I said. Then my mouth stopped working. My arms turned to sandbags. My legs crumpled. I crashed sideways onto the floor, completely paralyzed.

“Perfect.” Silbe knelt over me as Grover scrambled back, terrified.

“I remember you now, Percy Jackson,” she said. “Your friend is right.

You’re *no one*. Or at least, you’re about to be!”

T W E N T Y- O N E

Grover Leaves a Five-Hoof Review Wow, I was feeling fancy all right.

I couldn’t move my limbs. I was drooling uncontrollably. My nostrils and mouth burned like I’d just walked through a wildfire of burning polecat fur.

I was the fanciest heap of useless flesh in Lower Manhattan.

“Spellbound!” Silbe announced proudly. “Your loved one will be paralyzed by the fragrance!”

She beamed at Grover. “Good, don’t you think? I’m considering hiring some monster influencers, have them paralyze a few demigods and stream it live.”

“No!” Grover yelped. “No, that’s not good at all! Who would pay a thousand golden drachmas for *that*?”

He gestured at me. I tried not to be offended. I assumed he was talking about my condition, not me as a person.

“Oh, you’d be surprised,” Silbe said. “It’s all about exclusivity. Not many customers have an elixir as powerful as Spellbound. I can think of quite a few who would pay to turn this particular hero into a helpless sack of—”

“Hey!” Grover protested. “That’s my friend. I wasn’t kidding when I said I’m a Cloven Elder! You’d better fix him right now or—”

Silbe laughed. “You’re free to go, Mr. Cloven Elder. I’ll even give you a complimentary box of cypress perfume for your lady friend. You, I have no problem with. You weren’t there—”

“Where?” Grover demanded. “What did he ever do to you?”

“Are you *SERIOUS*?!” Silbe shrieked.

My fingers were starting to tingle. I guessed Grover was playing for time, hoping that the perfume’s effects would wear off soon. It would be a good strategy if it worked. Sadly, Silbe was still holding her Spellbound sampler, and it would only take another squirt to put Grover on the floor next to me. I tried to move my hand. My big toe twitched instead. Maybe if I drooled faster, or let my heart beat harder from absolute terror … Those things I could do.

Silbe shook her head in disgust. “He never even *told* you, did he? We were probably just another bunch of casual victims to him, a few more lives he destroyed along his way to herodom.”

“*Herodom* is not a real word,” Grover said. He looked at me. “Is it?”

I drooled unhelpfully.

I could feel all my toes inside my socks now. With luck, maybe I could manage to kick Silbe in the ankle.

“I’m not going to get into it,” Silbe grumbled. “The twins and Filomena think they’re the only ones who know how to use our new servant? I’ll show them! Wait until they see what I managed with Spellbound. They’ll *have* to give me more time with the witch.”

“The witch,” Grover said. “Gale.”

Silbe snorted. “Of course *Gale*. It’s not often life gives you a second chance, especially in the form of a magical polecat. I intend to make the most of it! Now leave, satyr, while you still can.”

He glanced at me. I winked, because that was all I could manage. I hoped it sent the message that my paralysis was slowly wearing off. If he could just buy me more time, like several hours …

“Fine!” Grover said. “But I expect gift wrapping!”

There was the satyr hero I knew and loved—cowing our enemies with demands of gift wrapping.

Silbe rolled her eyes. “Very well. I think I have … Let’s see. I’ll be right back.”

I heard her high heels clicking on the floor as she went into the back room. Grover knelt next to me, slapped my face, and whimpered, “Percy?

Percy, unfreeze!” as if I hadn’t thought of that myself. He grabbed a random vial from the display tray and spritzed me. This did not help, though it did make me smell like cherry blossoms.

From the back room, Silbe called, “I have jack-o’-lanterns or black cats!”

“No, not Halloween!” Grover shouted back. “This is for Saturnalia!”

Silbe growled in frustration, but she kept rummaging around.

“Percy!” Grover hissed. He lifted my arm, which fell right back down with a *smack*. At least it hurt. That meant my feeling was coming back.

With a panicky yelp, Grover rummaged around in his pockets. He pulled out a paper clip (why?), a Hot Wheels car (again, why?), and something that looked like a wad of lint. He opened my mouth and stuck the lint under my tongue.

I did my best to drool in an outraged way. My eyes sent the message *Dude*.

“Here we are!” Silbe crooned, bursting through the curtains with a roll of gift paper. “It has little snowflakes on it. That will have to do. And here are a few ribbons and bows to choose from. Now, normally, the price for the Cypress Summer Breeze would be—”

“Wait, I need gift wrapping for him, too.” He pointed at me.

Silbe looked incredulous enough for both of us. “You want to gift wrap your friend? But I was going to dispose of him, after I tied him up and showed him to my sisters. I was looking forward to gloating.”

“Silbe,” Grover said, “I can write you a glowing review in *Cloven Elders’ Monthly*. Five hooves. I’ve never given *any* establishment five hooves. But you have to meet me halfway. You said my friend has the same chemistry profile as my girlfriend, yes? I want to make sure the gift wrapping looks good on him before we wrap up her present!”

This made absolutely no sense to me. Then again, I was a slab of meat on the floor and nobody had asked my opinion. Also, the customer was always right, I guess. Silbe’s eyes had lit up at the thought of a five-hoof review in *Cloven Elders’ Monthly*, which I was pretty sure didn’t exist.

“Fine.” She set the bottle of Spellbound on the counter, knelt, and stuck a blue bow on my forehead. “Oh, yes, that’s definitely his color. I may present him to my sisters that way. Now, about your girlfriend’s gift …”

As they debated ribbon and bow options, I realized I could now taste the nasty lint under my tongue. Warmth was spreading down my throat and into my lungs. My fingers twitched. I could flex my hand.

Whatever Grover had put in my mouth seemed to be hastening my recovery.

Grover turned to keep Silbe's back to me. As he asked probing questions about her return policies, I managed to sit up, feeling woozy and sluggish. I fumbled for my sword, but I couldn't make my hand work right. I accidentally slumped into the sales counter, pushing it sideways, and a vial rolled off the edge and into my lap: the bottle of Spellbound.

Silbe spun to face me. "WHAT?!"

Grover hit her over the head with the roll of snowflake wrapping paper, which made her turn. "HEY!"

I managed to get my clumsy fingers around the perfume bottle. I almost squirted it in the wrong direction, into my own face, which would not have

been great. Just as Silbe realized that Grover was only a distraction and probably not serious about that five-hoof review, I got the vial pointed in the right direction and sprayed Silbe's legs.

She collapsed into a kneeling position.

"How dare you!" she shrieked.

I squirted her face five times.

She keeled over sideways and began to drool and twitch.

"Urgh," I said.

Grover helped me up. My legs felt like foam swimming-pool noodles. I leaned against the counter.

"Danks, man." I spat the lint out of my mouth. "Wha' waz zat?" It came out a little slurred since my tongue and lips were still numb.

"Piece of brown toad eye."

"Wha' now?"

"Curative dried mushroom. I wasn't sure it would work."

“Well, peesciate it,” I told him. “Neber gedding dat taste outta my mouf.

Les’ check da back woom ….” I tried to take a step and almost face-planted. “Maybe *you* should check the back woom. I’ll watch Silbe.”

Grover ducked behind the curtain. While he searched, Silbe and I glared at each other and drooled menacingly.

“No polecat,” Grover said when he reemerged. “But I did find this.”

He handed me another business card. This one was bright pink and read SCENTS FOREVER in glittery silver, with smaller letters at the bottom: DAEDRA AND PHAEDRA, PROPRIETORS, followed by an address.

“My gods,” I said. “The business names just keep getting worse.” At least my mouth was getting better. “I’m gonna guess Daedra and Phaedra are the twins. And this address is only, like, three blocks south.”

Grover nodded. “What do we do with this one?” He kicked Silbe’s shoe.

I thought about it. I didn’t want to make her go *poof* into a cloud of rose fragrance if I could help it, no matter how mean she had been to me.

Something told me these sisters had a legitimate reason for wanting revenge. I couldn’t remember what it was, but it made me feel bad.

“She’d look nice gift wrapped,” I said. “Maybe the jack-o’-lantern paper?”

Grover grinned. “There’s duct tape back there, too!”

We got to work making Silbe all pretty for Halloween.

I was feeling good about our work, almost giddy, when the store’s front door opened and a girl in a raincoat stormed in. With her hood up and an N95 mask over her face, I didn’t recognize her for a second. Then I noticed the dagger in her hand, like she was ready to shank a naiad.

When she saw us, her shoulders relaxed.

Annabeth swept her hood back and tugged down her mask. “Thank the gods you two are okay.” She looked at the blue bow on my forehead, then Silbe in her duct tape and jack-o’-lantern gift wrapping. “What in the name of Athena are you doing?”

T W E N T Y- T W O

Annabeth Asks to See the Manager I had some ’splaining to do.

I told Annabeth what had happened at Aeaea and Fancy Water.

She shook her head. “And you didn’t even wear raincoats?”

Grover splayed his hands. “*Thank* you.”

“We had things under control,” I said.

She marched up to me, smirked, then pulled the bow off my forehead.

“Okay. Please tell me you’re not wrapping up this naiad to send her Hermes Express to Mount Olympus.”

“Why would—Oh.” I’d momentarily forgotten about that thing with Medusa’s head and the gods. They hadn’t found it funny. “No. No tricks.

Just treats. You want some perfume?”

“I’m good.” She wiped the side of my mouth. “But I am *not* kissing you until you wash your face. Usually, you don’t drool when you’re awake.”

“How did you find us, anyway?”

“I got the note you left at my school. Skipped my last class and ran down here.”

“Your presentation went okay?”

“Aced it,” she said, like *Duh.* “Anyway, I got the feeling you didn’t have any idea what you were up against, so I came as fast as I could.”

“Thanks,” I said. “But honestly, we’re fine—”

“You’ve still got two more naiads to face. You wouldn’t have been fine.”

She glanced at our gift-wrapped salesperson. “Sorry about all this, Silbe.

Boys. What are you going to do?”

Silbe drooled in agreement.

Annabeth turned to me and Grover. “Come on. We’ll talk outside.”

She led us down the street, removing her raincoat as she walked. “I take it you didn’t recognize the naiads?”

“From where?” Grover asked.

“You weren’t with us,” Annabeth told him. “You were stuck in a Cyclops’s cave at the time.”

Grover shivered. “The Sea of Monsters.”

“Yep. The naiads are from the island of Aeaea.”

I rubbed my sore neck. “I think I would’ve remembered a name like Aeaea.”

Annabeth considered that. “Actually, you’re right. I don’t think anyone called it that when we were there. It’s another name for Circe’s Island.”

The smell of cedar shavings filled my nostrils. It had nothing to do with perfume. I flashed back to the time I’d spent as a guinea pig, stuck in a cage with guinea pig pirates. C.C.’s Spa & Resort had not been my favorite vacation destination.

“Oh,” I said. “That whole day is kind of a blur.”

There had been a lot of people on Circe’s Island. Two of her attendants, Reyna and Hylla, I got to know much later. Now they were good friends of ours. But Silbe and Filomena? I didn’t remember them at all.

“Circe had four main handmaidens,” Annabeth said. “The Aeaean nymphs. They were responsible for preparing her potions. I guess when the pirates burned down C.C.’s Spa—”

“The naiads came to Manhattan,” Grover finished. “And set up competing perfume shops. As one does.”

Annabeth nodded. “You just met two of the four sisters.”

“Possibly exploded one,” I said. “Gift wrapped the other.”

“And we’ve got two more to go,” Grover muttered. “Super.”

“So will they recognize you on sight?” I asked Annabeth. “They sure recognized me.”

I could almost see the gears turning in Annabeth’s head.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I met them when … when Circe sent me for that makeover. But if they recognized you, we should assume they’ll recognize me, too.”

I remembered Annabeth’s makeover. That had been back when we were in seventh grade, way before we started dating. Circe had tried her best to convince Annabeth to join her crew of super-fashionable witches, and for a hot minute, I’d thought Annabeth had given in. I remembered the way she looked in her elegant dress, with her coiffed hair and perfect makeup. I’d been a guinea pig at the time, but my little guinea-pig jaw had hit the floor of the cage.

“Right,” I said. “So, I’m going to take a wild guess that you have a plan to defeat the last two nymphs?”

“Working on it,” she agreed.

Grover and I exchanged a look of relief. Whenever Annabeth joined the chat, the odds of us doing something idiotic went way down. The odds were never zero, mind you, because I was still in the mix.

“First,” she said, “we need to dress the part. Glad it’s almost Halloween.

There’s a pop-up costume store right down the street.”

“Can I be Spider-Man?” I asked.

“Can I be Spider-Goat?” Grover asked. “We could do a multiverse thing

….”

“No spiders.” Annabeth shuddered. “I have something better in mind.”

An hour later, we rolled up to Scents Forever in our new costumes, which were *not* better than Spider-Man.

Well … maybe *Annabeth's* costume was better. She was dressed as a Roman noblewoman, with a flowing white gown that draped diagonally over one shoulder. Gold costume bangles glittered on her arms. She'd also picked the gaudiest golden necklace she could find. Up close, you could tell it was plastic, but we were hoping the naiads wouldn't get that close.

With the help of one of the costume people, Annabeth had done her hair and makeup like it had been on Circe's Island. She looked incredible, but you don't have to take my word for it. The costume person's exact reaction was "You look incredible." Then she turned to Grover and me and said,

"Now, these two are a challenge."

We were dressed as Annabeth's servants/bodyguards/loyal gladiators?

I'm not even sure, but we weren't rocking the look very well.

Grover wore a gladiator's breastplate and a leather kilt sort of thing, with a big plastic sword at his side. I got dressed like a *retiarius*—one of those Colosseum fighters with the weighted nets and the tridents. The trident seemed a little on the nose for me, but it wasn't my biggest complaint. My

"armor" was basically an oversize loincloth with a thick leather belt, sandals, and a weird shield-sleeve thing on my left arm that reminded me of a pizza pan. This meant I would basically be walking around Manhattan in late October in my underwear. Annabeth added a big helmet with a faceplate so nobody would recognize me unless they literally got up in my grill.

When I came out of the dressing room, Grover frowned. "I thought you had muscles and stuff."

"Dude," I said. "First of all, Muscles and Stuff sounds like a bankrupt fitness chain. Second, I'm a swimmer, not a bodybuilder."

"Okay …" he said, but it was clear he was not impressed with my level of ripped-ness.

By the time we got to Scents Forever, I was shivering. I had goose bumps down my arms. At least no one on the street looked twice at us—not that they would've anyway, since you see all kinds in New York, but with Halloween, it was especially easy to walk around dressed as a gladiator in a plastic diaper. The only one who got any stares was Annabeth, and the people checking her out were lucky I didn't poke them with my fake trident.

The perfume shop looked nicer than the first two we'd terrorized. The black-marble facade was two stories high, columned like a Greek temple.

The glowing white display windows made the vials and bottles inside look like sacred relics about to float off into the heavens. I hoped I wouldn't get spritzed with sacred floaty potion. I did not want to ascend while wearing a loincloth.

Annabeth didn't give us any advance pep talk. She just strode right into the shop with us in tow like she owned the place, us, and everything else in the neighborhood.

"I want to see the manager!" she announced.

Grover and I exchanged looks again. I'd never seen Annabeth play this role before. Entitlement? Check. Arrogance? Check. Nothing says *Pay attention to me because I'm horrible* like demanding to see the manager. It wasn't part of Annabeth's personality, but she pretended well.

The place had a few other customers. They all stopped browsing and quickly left. Nobody wanted to be caught in the cross fire of a manager-customer-gladiator throwdown.

An employee in a black pantsuit scrambled over to us. "Miss, perhaps I can help—"

Annabeth gave her a glare that could cut through titanium.

"I—I'll get the managers," the employee stammered. "Right away."

She hurried off to the back room, leaving us by ourselves.

The store’s interior had glowing white walls and dark tables. Transparent tubes ran along the ceiling. Maybe they deliver your perfume in pneumatic canisters, I thought. Against the back wall sprawled a display of chemistry beakers, decanters, Bunsen burners, and bubbling copper kettles—

everything the twenty-first-century witch needed to brew a good cup of organic fair-trade potion.

“No polecat,” I noticed.

“Patience,” Annabeth said. She walked over to the nearest display and picked up a bottle. She sniffed it, then set it back down.

She checked a few more tables, then zeroed in on a locked glass display case. Inside were three boxes, black and gold, with the label GALE, BY

SCENTS FOREVER.

“Aha!” Annabeth said.

“They decanted our polecat?” Grover cried. “We’re dead!”

“Stay calm.” Easy for Annabeth to say. She looked powerful. Us? We were armed with plastic weapons.

Then the managers appeared. Two women—clearly twins—marched in from the back room looking ready for a confrontation. Their dark hair was the same shade as the other two sisters’ but cut short and spiky. They wore matching black pantsuits. The only difference was that the one on the left wore silver earrings and the one on the right wore gold.

“Phaedra and Daedra,” Annabeth said.

That stopped them in their tracks. They studied Annabeth.

“I know you,” said the lady on the right.

“That’s right,” Annabeth said. “And you are both in serious trouble.”

T W E N T Y- T H R E E

We Find the Lair of Evil Perfume The twins had some ’splaining to do, too.

Before they could even ask *Why do you have scrawny gladiator boys?*

Annabeth laid into them.

“Do you have any idea who I am?” Annabeth asked.

Wow, she was cycling through *The Greatest Hits of Entitlement,* volume one.

“Y-you’re that girl,” said Phaedra, whose name I cleverly deduced from the name tag that said PHAEDRA.

“You destroyed Circe’s Island!” cried the also name-tagged Daedra.

Annabeth laughed. “That’s perfect, coming from *you two*. I didn’t destroy the island. The dumb *boy* I was with destroyed the island by letting those pirates loose! And did you stop it? Did either of you? No!”

“How d-dare—” Phaedra spluttered. “You weren’t even—”

“Picked out personally by Circe for special training?” Annabeth demanded. “Yes, I was! And while I have gone on to great things and accomplished huge feats, you two are hiding in Nolita selling cheap potions!”

“We’re not hiding,” Phaedra insisted.

“They’re not cheap!” Daedra added.

Behind them, their employee cleared her throat. “Um, mistresses?”

“Send your minion away,” Annabeth said. “It is better she doesn’t hear what I have to tell you.”

The twins didn’t like that, but Daedra snapped her fingers. “Leave us, Madeline.”

Madeline fled. For all I knew, she was going down the street to join Green Hair on his lunch break.

“Now,” Annabeth said, “perhaps you abandoned Circe—”

“Abandoned?” cried Daedra.

“—but I have gone on to even greater teachers!”

“There *are* no greater teachers!” yelled Phaedra.

Annabeth held up her Gramercy Park house keys, with the crossed-torch keychain. “Do you know these keys? Do you know who I work for?”

Phaedra gasped. “You—the goddess—?”

“Yes,” Annabeth said. “I work for the goddess Hecate herself!”

Technically, this was true, though Annabeth made it sound a lot more serious than a week of pet-sitting.

“That’s impossible.” Daedra sounded hurt. “She closed her school a century ago. She—she turned us away when we asked!”

The twins looked so dejected I actually felt bad for them. I imagined the four sisters showing up at the manse and getting yelled at by the door knockers. *No, you can’t come in! Yes, you can! TIMBERDOODLE!* Then maybe Hecate had scolded them, telling them to get lost. I thought about the ripped-up school flyer from 1913, and all those broken eyeglasses …. *What Could Have Been*. Whatever had happened a century ago to make Hecate close her school, she was still working through some issues. I just wished I understood what it had to do with SEJ.

“The goddess is very discerning about her students,” Annabeth said haughtily. “They have to be, well … smart. For instance, if you were going to steal the goddess’s beloved polecat, you should at least have known better than to name your new product *Gale*.”

I’d heard the expression *put someone on their back foot*, but I’d never actually seen it happen. Both Phaedra and Daedra put all their weight on the backs of their heels, leaning away from Annabeth as if she might breathe fire. I could have knocked them over with a plastic trident.

“I—I assure you,” Phaedra stammered, “we didn’t *steal* Gale! She came here quite on her own!”

“And she’s here now,” Annabeth guessed. “Your sisters Filomena and Silbe have already met the goddess’s displeasure. If I find that any harm has come to Gale, I will be happy to show you what—”

“No need!” Daedra yelped. “Gale is perfectly fine. We can—we can send her home, perhaps next week?”

“Or the week after?” Phaedra said. “We do have a large order coming up.”

“You will show me the polecat *now*,” Annabeth ordered.

The twins looked at each other. Annabeth had definitely pushed them toward fight or flight, and I guessed they were weighing their chances of either.

“Of course,” Daedra said. “Right this way.”

The twins hurried toward the back room, gesturing for us to follow.

Annabeth gave Grover and me a warning look. “Be ready,” she whispered.

She didn’t say ready for what, but we followed the nymphs into their workshop.

I don’t know how mythological villains can afford so much square footage in Manhattan. Like, they always seem to have these massive multilevel lairs with plenty of space for torture chambers and luxurious dens to recline in and plot their nefarious deeds or whatever. Do their landlords take golden drachmas? On the other hand, the air rights over the Empire State Building must’ve cost the gods of Mount Olympus several gazillion, so I guess I shouldn’t question it.

Phaedra and Daedra brought us down a winding iron staircase into a room big enough for an entire laboratory, which was good, because that’s what they had. Copper kettles spouted twenty different colors of steam.

Pipes with gauges ran along the walls, with big red handwheels to control the pressure. In the center of the room, an honest-to-gods cauldron bubbled with golden liquid that was probably not chicken soup. Worktables were stacked with vials of herbs, spices, and desiccated parts of creatures and plants. After seeing Hecate’s more modest kitchen, this place should have looked impressive. It was way bigger and more complex. But honestly, I got the feeling these nymphs were trying too hard. Hecate’s kitchen seemed functional. This place seemed like it was saying *Look how super talented we are! Soon, we will figure out what we are doing!*

And scurrying around the room, attached to a long golden chain that hung from a pulley system on the ceiling, was our old friend Gale.

The polecat did not appear to be enjoying her vacation. She ran furiously around the lab, followed by what looked like a swarm of angry metallic

bees. Gale would rummage through a box of vials, put her paw on one of them, and the bees would swarm around it, picking it up, carrying it to the cauldron, and dumping it in. Then Gale would scamper to locate her next ingredient. If Gale stopped to think or just take a breath, the bees would swarm her and sting her on the butt. Gale barked at them and farted, but the bees didn't seem to mind. They were probably Celestial bronze automatons, unbothered by trivial things like deadly gas.

"Gale!" Grover cried, forgetting that our role was to be silent and intimidating in our plastic armor.

The polecat glared at him and chattered a series of barks so scathing I couldn't print them—partly because I couldn't spell them, and partly because they are not fit for sensitive audiences.

The bees stung Gale and kept her running, cutting off her list of complaints.

Grover turned to the nymphs. "That polecat is *not* here voluntarily."

Phaedra looked shocked. "What? No! We've had zero complaints from her."

"She loves it here," Daedra agreed.

"SCREAK!" Gale yelped, pursued across a table by the swarm of bees.

"She does not love it here," Grover said.

Daedra and Phaedra huffed and feigned shock, offering all sorts of excuses about Gale's lack of transparency when it came to expressing workplace concerns.

Meanwhile, I'd done a pretty great job keeping my mouth shut, if I do say so myself. I was scanning the room, thinking about all the helpful water sources that I could use if things turned into a disaster—and things pretty much always turned into a disaster. I could explode the pipes and kettles. I could flood the whole basement. The problem was that a lot of the liquid in the lab was some form of potion, and I wasn't sure I wanted to be throwing around magical chemicals without knowing what they did. One sip of strawberry crème was what had gotten us into all this trouble to begin with.

Finally, Annabeth cut off the twins with an imperious wave of her hand.

“You have retained this polecat without her consent. You’ve used her to make potions for your own profit. Hecate will not be pleased. Release Gale into our custody right now and I won’t report you. Otherwise, you will face the wrath of the Triple Goddess!”

This sounded like a good line to me. I would have immediately said *Here, have a polecat!*

The twins, however, became eerily calm. Maybe it was something Annabeth had said, or Grover’s tone, or the way I was shifting nervously from foot to foot. It reminded me of when I swim with sharks—which is usually fun, when you’re a son of Poseidon—and they suddenly smell blood in the water. There is this nanosecond of frisson when they get the scent. Then they kick into death-machine, eat-everything mode.

The twins looked at each other, silently coming to agreement, and then turned to Annabeth.

“We may not be too *smart*,” Daedra said, “but we know Hecate would never want a disciple who failed to report the theft of her polecat.”

“You shouldn’t have offered,” Phaedra agreed. “It makes you look desperate.”

“You lost the goddess’s polecat, didn’t you?” said Daedra.

“That’s why you’re here,” added Daedra. “You’re in more trouble than we are.”

“How dare you?” Annabeth said, though it sounded too much like an actual question.

Phaedra smiled coldly. “Your performance was good. I almost believed you. But now I’m remembering how good an actor you were on Aeaea …

pretending to be on our side, right before you released the guinea pigs and destroyed our world.”

Annabeth tried to bluff it out. She clenched her fists, stepped forward, and locked eyes with Phaedra. “You have one last chance. Do the right thing or suffer the consequences.”

Even the polecat and the bees stopped moving. They seemed to be watching us, waiting to see who won the standoff. If the bees had tiny tubs of popcorn, I bet they would’ve been eating them.

“The boy you rescued,” Daedra said. “The one called Percy Jackson. I imagine you’ve brought him here in disguise!”

She marched over to Grover and tugged on his left horn.

“Owww!” said Grover.

Daedra frowned. She stepped sideways and knocked off my plastic helmet. “Aha!” she cried.

“No fair,” I said. “You didn’t have a search warrant to look under my helmet. This’ll all get thrown out in court.”

Daedra snarled. “Oh, you’ll be standing trial right here, Percy Jackson.

The goddess’s wrath will not fall on us. *You* failed to keep her pets. We will be the servants of Hecate’s vengeance.”

“Indeed.” Phaedra pulled a vial of green fluid from her pantsuit pocket.

“We will kill you, return your bodies to Hecate, and explain how badly you failed her. We will return Gale as well, and the goddess shall reward us!”

“*After* Gale finishes teaching us how to make all her secret recipes,”

Daedra added.

“Yes, after that, of course,” her sister agreed. “Prepare to die, demigods!”

“And satyr,” Annabeth said.

“Whatever!” Phaedra threw the vial at Annabeth’s feet.

T W E N T Y- F O U R

We Have a Nice, Orderly Free-for-All Yelling *Whatever!* at my girlfriend and throwing a potion at her are two great ways to make me angry. And when I get angry, liquids explode.

(That sounded more impressive in my head.)

Before Annabeth could react, I threw aside my plastic trident and willed the green liquid straight back at Phaedra, splattering her head to toe.

Phaedra shrieked. She collapsed and started to tremble.

“Phaedra!” cried her sister. “You paralyzed her!”

Annabeth looked stunned. I guess she hadn’t been expecting me to bend the laws of physics quite so early in the fight. I pulled my sword and advanced on Daedra.

“Grover!” I called over my shoulder. “Free the polecat!”

Daedra hissed and grabbed a vial from the nearest table.

“Don’t even think about it!” I snarled.

The problem was that to stop her, I’d have to slice her to dust. Maybe I could justify it, but I still didn’t like the idea. I’ll admit, it’s a lot easier to swing a sword at the Minotaur, or a seven-foot-tall bear demon howling for blood, than it is to stab a nymph in a nice outfit in her downtown boutique.

My hesitation gave Daedra time to uncork the vial. I got ready to blast the contents back at her, but she faked me out. She chugged them instead.

She shuddered, her body swelling and mutating until standing before me was … you guessed it, a seven-foot-tall bear demon howling for blood. I really needed to stop manifesting my worst life.

Meanwhile, Annabeth grabbed some rubber tubing and started tying Phaedra’s wrists together. Grover chased Gale, who was still running around pursued by angry robot bees.

There was a lot going on in this laboratory.

Daedra lunged at me, but she was still clumsy in her new form. I danced out of the way.

“I don’t want to kill you!” I warned.

Daedra Bear roared. She overturned the bubbling cauldron, forcing me to scramble backward. I braced for her to charge, but she was a tricky teddy.

She lunged at Annabeth instead.

My heart did a jackknife. “Look out!”

Annabeth turned in time to see three tons of Daedra the Pooh hurtling her way. She leaped aside, but Daedra managed to backhand her, sending her crashing into the wall.

“No!” I ran toward them, splashing through the pool of steaming cauldron soup. I got to the bear before she could claw Annabeth and I slashed with Riptide—cutting clean through Daedra’s right paw.

The paw went flying. Daedra howled. Instead of blood, greenish-yellow tree sap trickled from the wound. Gross, yes. Violent, yes. But with Annabeth in danger, my qualms about attacking nymphs in their boutiques evaporated.

Daedra stumbled away, shrinking and shedding fur as she turned back to her regular form. I ran to Annabeth, who was already getting up.

“I’m fine!” She sounded more exasperated than hurt. “Go help Grover!”

“Yes, please!” Grover shouted.

He’d managed to grab Gale and stick her under one arm, which meant the bee swarm was now after him. They were stinging him in all the worst places while he tried unsuccessfully to swat them away with his panpipes. I suppose his nature music wouldn’t work on automated bees, which seemed like a design flaw. If we survived this, I’d have to write Hephaestus a heated letter.

I sprinted toward Grover. Halfway there, my back leg froze in place, nearly giving me whiplash. My left shoe, which had splashed through the puddle, was now stuck fast to the floor. A layer of orange foam bubbled and swelled around it, spreading across the stone tiles.

On the bright side: at least I’d kept my socks and shoes on, even though it was a fashion faux pas when dressed in plastic gladiator wear. Otherwise, I would’ve run barefoot through that steaming goo. On the less bright side: running through that steaming goo at all had turned out to be less than bright.

The orange foam was making its way up toward my ankle.

I know what you're thinking: *Just yank your foot out of your shoe.*

Great idea, except as the goo expanded, it hardened into something like cement, locking my foot in the shoe. The foam had now reached the fabric of my sock.

"Percy, just step out of your shoe!" yelled Annabeth, who was now chasing a one-handed, half-bear Daedra around the room, trying to brain her with a bronze pot.

"I know!" I yelled back.

Did she think I was dumb? Had I ever given her reason to—You know what? Forget I asked that.

"Help!" Grover said.

His lips and eyes were almost swollen shut from bronze-bee stings. Gale, still attached to that golden chain, had leaped out of his armpit and scurried away. She was now being outstandingly unhelpful by hiding in an air duct, watching the chaos from a safe distance. In her defense, it was probably the first time in two days she wasn't being chased by bees or shuffled from one evil perfumery to another.

I yanked against the goo-cement. On my third try, I pulled my foot out of my sock with a loud *POP* and a sharp pain in my ankle. At least I was free.

If you're keeping score, that means my Halloween costume was now down to a loincloth, an arm shield, one sock, and one shoe. If I couldn't kill the nymphs with my sword, maybe I could horrify them to death with my appearance.

I limped over to Grover—yeah, my ankle was definitely messed up—

then started yelling and swatting at bees.

Meanwhile, Annabeth caught up with Daedra and whacked her over the head with the pot. Daedra stumbled off in a daze, tufts of bear fur falling off her face. If she could have found a potion that made cartoon birdies swirl around her head, she probably would've drunk it.

Unfortunately, Annabeth had been distracted from her earlier task of tying up Phaedra, who was starting to stir.

"Behind you!" I yelled.

I would have done more, but I was swarmed.

Pro tip: If you're going to make Celestial bronze bees angry, it's best not to do so in your underwear. For every bee I managed to smack with my sword, I got half a dozen stings. Each felt like a hot nail being hammered into my skin.

At least I gave Grover time to think. He grabbed the nearest Bunsen burner, rolled up a scroll, and lit a homemade torch.

From across the room, a newly unparalyzed Phaedra shrieked, "Stop!

Those are priceless recipes!"

Annabeth punched her in the mouth with the hilt of her dagger—a scene that was also priceless.

Grover waved his torch, driving off the bees with smoke. I kept swatting until the last bronze butt-biter flew into the wall with a satisfying *crunch*.

I turned to Grover, who was gasping and covered in welts.

"You okay?" I asked.

Before he could answer, from across the room came a triumphant "Ha-HA!"

Annabeth had been grappling with Phaedra, who was still acting pretty feisty despite getting bashed in the mouth. The cry had come from Daedra, now

fully naiad again, minus one hand, and only partially concussed, I guessed. She threw herself into the fray, jumping on Annabeth's back.

Annabeth staggered.

We limped over to help, but Phaedra was faster. She pulled another potion out of her pocket—in a mother-of-pearl flask that looked expensive enough to be deadly.

Annabeth managed to shake off Daedra.

Phaedra chugged her potion and yelled, "BEAST BREATH!"

I didn't know villains actually yelled the names of their special attacks in real life. Maybe the twins had been playing too much *Mortal Kombat*.

Grover and I got to Annabeth's side just as Phaedra opened her mouth and spewed a cloud of white gas at us.

T W E N T Y- F I V E

There Ain’t No Cure for the Beast-Breath Blues

At least Annabeth didn’t take the entire blast. To cover the most ground, Phaedra breathed on us the way you might slash with a blade—diagonally, top to bottom. Annabeth got fogged in the face. I got it across the chest.

Grover got fumigated below the belt.

At first, nothing seemed to happen. I felt so relieved I smacked Phaedra in the nose with the hilt of my sword. Her eyes rolled up into her head and she collapsed. Annabeth elbowed Daedra in the face, putting her on the floor, too. I hoped there were some good plastic surgeons in the area because after this fight, the twins were going to need matching nose jobs.

Both of our attackers were down. The bees had been smashed. We'd only destroyed half the laboratory, and Gale was still alive, watching us cautiously from her perch in the air duct.

I sighed in relief. "That … actually could have been worse."

I shouldn't have said that.

Annabeth responded, *"WHOOOO!"*

I would have jumped out of my pants if I'd been wearing any. Where my girlfriend's face had been a second before, two huge black eyes stared out over a hooked golden beak. Her head had turned into a heart-shaped expanse of white plumage, rimmed with speckled brown feathers. From the neck up, my Wise Girl was a barn owl.

"What?!" I yelped.

Annabeth's new head turned sideways. *"WHO?"*

They were both really good questions.

Grover sobbed. "Percy—oh my gods!"

"It—it'll be fine," I stammered. "We'll figure it out."

"No, look at yourself!" Grover demanded.

I glanced down. I was still bare-chested. Still in my underwear. I raised my hands—except I didn't have hands anymore. Where my arms used to be were eight thick purple tentacles lined with pink suction cups. One tentacle

was curled around Riptide. I was so shocked I loosened my hold, letting the blade drop.

"Oh …"

I wanted to throw up. No offense to octopuses. I've had some great conversations with octopuses. But I didn't want to have their tentacles. My

new appendages felt wet and slimy. Powerful muscles rippled under the skin. The suckers clasped and unclasped, smelling the air, searching for something to grip. “This is bad.”

“That’s not all,” Grover whimpered.

It was hard to get out of my own misery zone, but I forced myself to look at Grover.

He was staring down at his legs and weeping. Where his furry goat hindquarters had been, there was bare skin, forward-articulating knees, and instead of hooves … feet. Five-toed feet not too different from mine.

“Human,” he sniffled. “That’s the *worst* kind of beast!”

I fought down a little resentment, because of the three of us, I felt like he’d gotten the least-awful deal. Beestings included. Then again, I wasn’t a satyr.

“It’s—Yeah,” I said. “I’m sorry, man. But there has to be a cure.”

“There isn’t!” wailed Phaedra from the floor.

These naiads were tough. Phaedra had sap leaking out her broken nose and white beast juice crusted around her battered mouth, but she was already trying to get back up.

“How are you still conscious?” I demanded.

“You fool!” she cried. “Beast breath has no antidote. You will be like that forever!”

Annabeth turned her head 180 degrees and shrieked at the nymph.

“AWK!”

It sounded like more of a statement than a question. I guessed Annabeth was cursing in owl. Or maybe she was just reacting to noise from a rival predator. Had the potion changed the inside of her head, too? Did she now have the brain of a raptor?

I knew owls were supposed to be Athena's animals, wise and knowing and all that, but I didn't like the idea of my girlfriend having to live the rest of her life with the head of a bird. I mean … yes, I was pretty nocturnal. We could try to make it work. But if she started swallowing rodents whole and coughing up owl pellets … No! There *had* to be a solution.

The whole room felt like it was shaking. I tried to calm the tremors in my gut.

"Grover," I said. "Can you tie these nymphs up tight this time?"

He stared miserably at his legs.

"I feel so violated," he muttered. "My beautiful fur … My hocks and dewclaws—"

"Grover!" I flailed my tentacles. I hadn't meant to, but they responded to my agitation, shimmying around and coiling into loops. I was lucky I didn't squirt ink out of my armpits. "Grover, I know, man, but please."

"Don't call me a man!" he sobbed.

The tremble in my gut was getting worse and started moving down into my legs. I wished I'd been first in line with the beast breath. I probably would have turned into a mackerel head or something, but at least Annabeth would've still been able to talk and tell us what to do. She would've had an idea.

Me … I had a hundred new suckers and a strange desire to hunt lobsters.

"Grover, tie up the twins, would you?" I pleaded. "I gotta think …."

"Okay, okay." Grover shuffled awkwardly toward Daedra. "How do you *walk* on these? They're so tender! Ouch. Ouch. Ouch."

Meanwhile, Annabeth, who, thankfully, still had human arms, started tying Phaedra's wrists together with rubber hoses. I hoped that meant she was still thinking like herself.

Grover grabbed some duct tape. He knelt next to Daedra, who was now groaning and half-conscious, then apparently realized it was going to be hard to tie her wrists together since she only had one hand. He padded over to the severed bear paw, picked it up by one claw, and took it back to Daedra. He duct-taped it back to her wrist, despite the fact that it was several sizes too big.

“A good surgeon should be able to reattach this if you hurry,” Grover said.

“It’s a bear paw!” Daedra complained. “I’m a nymph!”

“Er, there, there,” Grover said, patting her shoulder, which did not seem to comfort her.

“There’s got to be something in this lab,” I said. “All these potions …”

“There isn’t,” Phaedra said. “You’re doomed to stay as you are! Even if you *could* concoct a cure, you don’t have time.”

“WHO?” Annabeth asked.

“Look!” Phaedra pointed with her chin.

The bubbling pool of cauldron soup continued to spread. It was now six feet in diameter, with gooey tendrils snaking between the stone tiles, cracking the floor apart. Noxious steam rose from the fissures. The trembling I felt wasn’t just me. The room was shaking.

“We may be doomed,” Phaedra cackled, “but you are too if you stay here! Soon this entire building will collapse into a bottomless pit!”

That definitely didn’t sound good.

What would Annabeth do? I mean, if she wasn’t a barn owl …

I glanced up at Gale, still watching us curiously from the air duct. I remembered my shadow-travel disco experience with Hecuba, and the way we had finally bonded at the ruins of Troy ….

“Grover, Annabeth,” I said. “Get the twins out of here. Get to safety.”

“Looking like this?” Grover demanded.

“AWK!” screeched Owl-a-beth.

“I have an idea,” I promised.

I met Annabeth’s big black bird eyes. I didn’t need to be an expert in owl facial expressions to know she was skeptical. I had ideas the way other people had rashes … they were usually embarrassing and not something you wanted to share.

“Trust me,” I said, flailing my new purple tentacles. “I’m going to talk to the polecat.”

T W E N T Y- S I X

Okay, There Might Be a Cure, but You're Not Gonna Like It

Actually, I couldn't talk to polecats.

If I'd been logical about it, I would've left that job to Grover. But Grover was in no mood. He was too depressed about having toenails.

While he and Annabeth dragged the nymphs upstairs, I approached Gale as nonthreateningly as I could. That wasn't easy with the floor cracking under my feet. My tentacles didn't help, either. They lashed around as if they had minds of their own … which, come to think of it, octopus tentacles did. The ADHD part of my head-brain wondered if I could subcontract homework assignments to my new arm-brains. *No … bad Percy. Stay focused on the polecat.*

"Hey, Gale." I tried to sound casual, like we'd just run into each other at a coffee shop. "I don't blame you for hiding up there. Last few days have been a lot, huh?"

Gale glared at me, probably thinking, *Dude, you're part octopus. Yes, that's a lot.*

"I want to—" I caught myself before I could say *get you home.* I remembered how that conversation had gone with Hecuba. "I want to free you from that chain. Then you can make up your own mind about what to do next."

The room shook. The orange foam was seeping into the concrete foundation, opening fracture lines big enough to swallow a mustelid. More tendrils of goo crept up the walls, eating away at the bricks and mortar. A chunk of ceiling plaster the size of a dinner plate crashed next to my foot.

Gale hissed and backed into the air duct, but she could only get so far before she reached the end of her golden chain. Otherwise, I got the feeling she would've been long gone.

“Gale, we don’t have much time ….” I flailed my tentacles in a calm and reasonable fashion. “I need your help. I know Phaedra said there’s no cure for that beast-breath stuff, but I’m betting you know an antidote.”

The polecat poked her nose out of the duct, like, *Who, me?*

“You don’t owe me anything,” I admitted. “But today I’ve seen what you can do with potions. You really are amazing.”

She puffed up her fur, then farted angrily.

“I know,” I said. “Hecate doesn’t give you enough credit. It’s like she’s forgotten you used to be something besides a cute furry pet.”

“BARK!” Exactly.

Wow … either I was starting to understand Polecat, or I was hallucinating from the six thousand magic chemicals in the air.

“I didn’t appreciate you before,” I said. “You have *skills*. That was the real reason Hecate turned you into a polecat, wasn’t it? Not the whole …

gassy problem. She was jealous that you were becoming too powerful.”

“BARK!” Obviously.

(*Exactly* and *obviously* sounded almost identical in Polecat, and yeah, I was definitely starting to hallucinate.)

“Now that I’ve got these”—I waved my rows of pink suckers—“I’m starting to understand how tough it must be. You have it even worse. Hecate made sure you have no voice, no opposable thumbs, no way to brew potions on your own.”

A large crack zigzagged up the wall right next to Gale’s perch. That orange goo was powerful stuff. I wondered if my sock and shoe had somehow supercharged it—the perfect nutrients for a growing goo monster.

“Let’s make an antidote together,” I said. “It might work on you, too—if you *want* to be human again. If not, no judgment. Show me what to do. But we have to brew the cure before this place falls down around our ears.”

Gale chittered, then bit her shackle in frustration.

“Of course I’ll free you first,” I said. “Then you can decide. You deserve to show your skills, but not like this … chained up and forced to work for a bunch of greedy perfume nymphs. Let’s make that antidote so it can help us all. When we get back to Hecate’s—”

Gale hissed. *That witch!*

“*If* you decide to go back,” I corrected myself, “I’ll make sure Hecate understands your worth. We can get you your own lab, some assistants with opposable thumbs, whatever you want!”

Gale tilted her head. *Why should I trust you?*

“I’m not leaving without you,” I said. “So …”

I waved a tentacle at the crumbling laboratory. More cracks had appeared in the walls. The floor looked like a shattered, gooey sheet of glass. Soon,

we’d be buried under tons of rubble and fancy cologne.

Gale jumped to the nearest table. She presented her chain.

“Great,” I said. “Just hold still ….”

It took a few tries to pick up my sword. Even with one human brain in my skull and a mini octopus brain in each of my eight arms, learning to coordinate my tentacles wasn’t easy. Finally, I got a steady grip on the handle. I rested another tentacle on Gale’s back, and …

Shock. Dizziness. Pain.

Tentacles were sensory organs. I knew that, but this was nothing like human senses. I could *smell* Gale’s history. I could taste her emotions. An electrical

current passed between us, letting me hear every muscle in her body, every chemical washing through her brain, every memory painted by her neurons.

I saw a young woman in tattered brown robes. She carried a leather pack over one shoulder, loaded with medicinal plants, vials, salves, and scrolls. It was her life's work—all she could salvage when the Colossians chased her out of their city. She struggled up a steep mountain path, occasionally stopping to grip her stomach, crying out in pain. Tears streaked her face, smearing the kohl around her eyes so she appeared to have a black mask.

Her intestines felt like they were filled with broken glass. The condition had been getting worse ever since Apamea, when Hecate had appeared in her dreams, warning her to stop. But Gale hadn't stopped. She had been so close.

Then Colossae. She had brought a girl back to life with her potions! And how did the city reward her? With fear, hatred, torches, violence. They kicked her and spat on her. All she could do was hiss and scurry away into the shadows, fleeing for her life.

Now she had reached the end of her strength. She'd had such plans. She *knew* how talented she was. She could be a goddess, invent an immortality potion—something even better than Dionysus's gift of wine. Why not?

Why should she not be rewarded by the gods?

Gale stopped at the top of a cliff, where the trail split to the left and right.

Standing at that miserable deserted crossroads was a tall woman in dark flowing robes, her head crowned in a fiery wreath of silver.

"I warned you," said Hecate, her tone surprisingly gentle. "They will never accept a woman of your power."

Gale's gut pain made her double over. She whimpered, hating herself for looking so weak.

"This is the final crossroads," Hecate said. "You could give up your magical arts and live."

“Never,” Gale insisted. “You are my goddess! Why do you not protect me?”

Hecate looked pained. “I cannot protect you from the way they see you. I cannot protect you from your own talent. They fear you. They will never allow you to rise.”

“The gods or men?” Gale snarled.

Hecate didn’t reply. She didn’t need to. Gale knew the answer was *both*.

“You could die,” Hecate said. “And the pain would stop.”

“No!” Gale snapped. “I won’t give them that satisfaction.”

Hecate nodded. “The only other choice is the hardest. To live—in eternal suffering. You would have your immortality, but not as a human or a god.

That they would never allow. Your existence must be a curse, not a blessing. It is the only way a witch of your talent could survive.”

“Then do it!” Gale snarled.

She began to change—shrinking, growing fur, cursing, and shrieking in pain—until a polecat lay prone at the goddess’s feet. Hecate knelt, gently picked up the little animal, and cradled it in her arms.

“So be it,” Hecate said.

I lifted my tentacle from Gale’s back. My gut hurt. My eyes burned.

I’d been wrong about Hecate. She hadn’t turned Gale into a polecat out of jealousy. The reason was worse. She’d *empathized*. She’d lacked faith that Gale could survive on her magical talents alone. Hecate of all people knew how the world saw witches. She’d pitied Gale, admired her, and yes, maybe even feared her a little, but she could not imagine a mere human succeeding when she, a goddess, had failed. So Gale had to cease being human.

The laboratory was still shaking apart. Gale waited for me to cut her chain. She gave no sign that she was aware of what I’d sensed.

I steadied the tentacle holding Riptide and brought the sword down on the golden restraint, severing it neatly a few inches from Gale's collar.

The polecat stared at me with surprise. *You didn't kill me. Also, why are you crying?*

"You can flee if you want." My voice was hoarse. "Maybe your next adventure will end up better than this …. Or we can help each other. Either way, for what it's worth, I believe in you."

Gale's whiskers quivered. She might've been sniffing the air, estimating how much time we had left based on the smell of the goo-pocalypse. Or maybe she was just thinking *You are one strange kid.* At last, she raced over to another table and put her paws on the rim of a mixing bowl.

I hobbled over on my twisted ankle and looked inside. "It's empty."

Her expression said, *No kidding, Einstein. We're going to mix the potion in here.*

"Got it," I said. "Show me what we need."

Honestly, Gale was a pretty good teacher. She'd run to a vial or pot and tap it to indicate we should add its contents to our concoction. I couldn't wear gloves, for obvious reasons, but after a few tries, I got the hang of picking up vials without breaking them, then tipping them just enough to pour the liquid into the bowl. I even learned how to hold a spoon with my tentacles to scoop and mix. My mom would have been so proud. If I could learn to tie my shoes, she'd probably never let me change back to having human hands.

Whenever it was time to stop pouring, Gale barked. She scratched her paws on the table in a digging gesture to indicate when I should stir.

Meanwhile, the room disintegrated around us. The biggest fissure on the floor was now a foot-wide chasm that glowed orange and went down as far as I could see. I didn't want to find out if it led to the Underworld. And no way did I want to be around when orange goo started dripping through Hades's palace ceiling. I'd met his plumbers. They tended to solve all his problems with fiery whips.

Slowly, our ingredients dissolved into a thick gray paste. I worried about the measurements, because every once in a while I'd spill too much powder or smoking liquid, and Gale would chirp at me in irritation. But she didn't make me start over. That was good, because chunks of ceiling plaster kept raining down around us until I could see the support beams right over our heads.

I was not having fun. I did not discover a natural talent for cooking. But if anyone ever wants to do a reality show mashup of *The Great British Bake Off* and *Ninja Warrior*, hit me up. I have ideas.

At last, I poured in something that looked like iron filings.

"SCREEK!" Gale commanded, digging her claws into the table. *STIR, OCTOPUS BOY! STIR FOR YOUR LIFE!*

I stirred. The paste changed color—first black, then turquoise. It smelled like cinnamon rolls, which was weird, since I hadn't added any cinnamon.

Or rolls.

A new fissure opened in the floor behind me. To my left, the wall collapsed in a tidal wave of bricks.

"BARK!" Gale shrieked. *Good enough!*

She jumped onto my shoulder, I wrapped my tentacles around the bowl, and we fled the workshop as fast as my ankle would allow. We ran through Scents Forever and joined Annabeth, Grover, and our two hog-tied naiads on the sidewalk.

"GO, GO, GO!" I yelled.

Grover and Annabeth ran, dragging the nymphs behind them. We made it across the street as Scents Forever imploded, slipping into a glowing orange chasm that wasn't going to do much for the neighborhood's property values.

Phaedra wailed. "All our work! Our lives' work!"

Her comment hit like a knife in my stomach. It reminded me too much of my vision of Gale.

“HOOT!” Annabeth said. My translation: *Don’t complain. We’re letting you live.*

“I will have vengeance!” Phaedra promised. “My sisters and I—”

A police car turned down Lafayette, sirens blaring as it came to check out why random buildings were imploding. I figured more emergency vehicles would be here soon.

“Good luck to you,” I told the nymph, and I meant it. “Come on, guys!”

While Phaedra screamed, we ran away like the heroic half-mutated demigods we were.

T W E N T Y- S E V E N

We Eat Toothpaste

I'll say it again: thank the gods for Halloween.

I doubt any amount of Mist could have hidden Owl-a-beth and Octo-Percy from the curious eyes of mortals as we fled, especially since my tentacles kept slapping passersby for no particular reason. Because it was Halloween, though, most people would think, *Wow, those costumes are incredible, and that third guy is fully human! Amazing!*

After a few blocks, we ducked into an alley to catch our breath.

"WHO!" Annabeth said.

I looked at Grover. “Can you understand her?”

Grover’s face was still covered in bee-sting welts. He picked a piece of gravel from between his toes. “What? No. It’s not a regular animal language she’s speaking. It’s—I don’t know.”

“WHO!” Annabeth demanded.

I held up one tentacle in a placating gesture. Then I realized it might look like a worm to a giant bird, so I put it down again. “I’m going to guess you’re asking what happens now. Gale and I made a possible cure.”

On my shoulder, Gale chirped, *It’s not just possible! It’s genius!*

I explained how Gale and I had bonded while mixing potions in a collapsing building. I didn’t mention the vision I’d seen. I didn’t think Gale would appreciate me sharing that with the whole group, but I proudly presented Annabeth and Grover our bowl of turquoise goop.

Annabeth rotated her head in a circle and coughed. Everybody’s a critic.

Grover sniffed. “I think it smells good. Like cinnamon toothpaste. Do we rub it on our gums?”

“I—Hmm. I thought it was like a lotion for your skin ….”

“Bark!” Gale said, outraged.

“We have to eat it?” I asked.

“Bark!” Gale agreed.

Suddenly I wasn’t so sure about this recipe. The process of making it had been a blur, but I remembered the iron filings, a few bubbling toxins, and some things that had looked like insect shells.

“How much?” Grover asked.

I looked in the bowl. My heart sank. There wasn't nearly as much as I'd thought. The paste had congealed into three golf-ball-size lumps, almost like it had divided itself into suggested serving sizes. But if we only had three …

I started to say, "I'm not sure—"

"Gimme," said Grover.

He scooped out one blob of paste and stuck it in his mouth.

As soon as he swallowed, he doubled over and gagged. "ACK!"

I put my hand on his back. "Grover?"

My polecat lab partner skittered across my shoulders, anxious to see what would happen to Patient Zero. Despite my newfound respect for Gale, I had a horrible thought that this paste might be an elaborate prank to make us all fart forever.

Grover shuddered violently. He staggered over to a dumpster and retched.

"WHO!" Annabeth ruffled her head plumage.

"Oh, gods," I said. "I'm so sorry, Grover! We'll get you back to the manse. Maybe there's an antidote or—"

"No," Grover gasped. "Wait."

He retched a little more. Tufts of goat hair started sprouting on his legs.

His knees bent backward. His feet hardened and turned into hooves.

Praise the squirrels! Grover was a satyr again.

He turned and spat out a toenail. "Blah."

"How do you feel?" I asked.

"That is definitely *not* cinnamon toothpaste." He gave me a weak smile.

Even the welts on his face were starting to fade. “But you did it, Percy! I feel like me.”

“Gale is the real hero,” I said.

Gale chittered, obviously pleased.

I turned to Annabeth. “Okay … so if you’re ready …”

Annabeth tore into the second ball of paste with her sharp, hooked bill.

Gale jumped off my shoulder and scampered to a nearby fruit crate …. I guess because giant owls are something polecats have nightmares about.

Annabeth gagged. Her beak opened wide. Her owl eyes got even larger.

Her crown feathers stood on end like blades. She brought her hands to her throat—the universal sign for choking.

I panicked. Would the Heimlich maneuver work on a half human, half raptor? I only had octopus tentacles, but I hustled behind her and did my best to find her sternum the way my fourth-grade health teacher had taught us. I thrust upward into her diaphragm.

COUGH!

An owl pellet the size of a melon shot from her throat and bounced off the opposite wall. She doubled over, breathing heavily. When she straightened again, she was normal Annabeth—human face, human hair with the scent of her usual apple shampoo.

“You okay?” I asked.

“I’ll take stupid questions for five hundred, please,” she said hoarsely.

I grinned. “That’s a yes.”

She looked at my octopus arms. “You, however …”

“Yeah …” I looked in the bowl. One blob of paste was stuck to the bottom. It was even smaller than the doses Grover and Annabeth had taken.

Annabeth seemed to understand the problem. It was nice to be able to read her expressions again, even if she was looking at me with a mix of anxiety and dread.

“Your call,” she said.

I walked over to Gale’s fruit crate. I knelt so we were eye to eye.

“There’s only enough left for one of us, isn’t there?”

She chirped—definitely a *yes*.

“I don’t suppose we can make more when we get back to Hecate’s?” I asked.

She gave me a longer series of barks and chitters. I looked at Grover for a translation.

“She says no,” he told me. “Some of those ingredients take centuries to grow.”

I imagined Hecate could change me back with a wave of her hand. Then again, if I looked like a half octopus when she got home, the truth would come out. She’d blast me into deep-fried Percy calamari.

Maybe I could ask my dad for help. He was an expert on sea stuff. Then again, he already had one immortal son, Triton, with two fish tails. Poseidon might not see the issue. Then we’d get into a whole *sea animals are better than land animals* conversation. He’d probably tell me he’d always wanted an octopus for a son and I should consider myself lucky.

I shuddered, my tentacles rippling with revulsion.

I offered the bowl to Gale. “I promised I would help you if you helped me. And you did. You saved my friends. If you want to be human again, you deserve it. You’re an incredible witch, maybe the best ever.”

Gale tilted her head, considering me. I got the feeling she knew exactly what I'd seen when I touched her back in the lab. I was determined not to show her any pity. I meant what I said. She was incredible. She deserved more than a curse.

The polecat started chittering again.

"She says she likes you," Grover translated. "You're not bad for a demigod."

"Thanks?"

"She appreciates you keeping your word."

I nodded. No problem. I could have tentacles forever. Maybe I'd finally learn to tie my shoes.

"But she doesn't want to change back to human," Grover added.

I caught my breath. "Wh-what?"

"Polecats are much prettier," Grover said. "And she's had centuries to get used to her new form. Besides, she's immortal. If she turned human, she'd get old and die. Then she'd have less time to research new recipes. She wants you to take the antidote. But she also wants you to keep your promise about asking Hecate to let her have an alchemy lab and assistants with opposable thumbs."

"I … Yeah, of course!"

Gale pushed the bowl toward me with her little paws. *"CHARK!"*

"Thanks, Gale," I said, tearing up all over again. "You are a polecat among polecats."

I scooped up the paste with the tip of my tentacle and choked it down.

I will spare you the details. There was much retching. Things came out of my mouth that should never come out of a human mouth. But once I was

done throwing up, I had my old arms back again. The first thing I did was pull Grover and Annabeth into a group hug.

Gale hopped onto my shoulder and farted in camaraderie. I kissed Annabeth, though my breath probably smelled like cinnamon and bug shells.

“How about we get back to Hecate’s?” I suggested. “I have a weird craving for lobster rolls.”

T W E N T Y- E I G H T

I Make a Bad Plan

Back at the manse, the hellhounds were just waking up.

Nope thought we smelled *really* interesting. I guessed that, to him, Grover's hooves smelled like feet, my arms smelled like seafood, and Annabeth smelled like she'd been watching over two numbskulls all afternoon and had possibly turned into a bird.

Gale and Hecuba greeted each other with a nose boop. It wasn't exactly a tearful reunion, but I got the feeling they were glad to see each other. Their body language seemed to say, *Yes, I am relieved you're back, now let us never speak of this again.* Nope sniffed Gale's butt and apparently confirmed that she smelled so bad she must be part of the family.

Gale danced around impatiently until Grover agreed to take her to the feeding room for a chicken carcass. I checked on the eels, who were disappointed we hadn't died and brought our own remains home for them to eat … which didn't make sense, but eels have their own kind of logic.

Nobody else wanted lobster rolls, so we got pizza delivered instead. We sat in the great room with the animals and scarfed down three large pies, leaving nothing behind. Grover eyed the greasy boxes, but I suggested he not try eating them. I knew from experience his digestive track didn't do well with cardboard.

I leaned against one of the broken benches, an ice pack on my ankle. I was exhausted and wired at the same time. I wanted to enjoy the fact that we'd retrieved both of Hecate's pets. We'd even acquired a bonus puppy.

That seemed like a pretty good week's work. Unfortunately, the mansion was still a wreck. Despite our best efforts with shower curtains, dust pans, and duct tape, the place still looked like somebody had driven through in a monster truck and thrown a few hand grenades. It was hard to believe all the damage had been caused by one hulked-out satyr. Then again, now that I'd experienced the joys of potion-based combat, I had a better sense of how wrong things could go.

Grover seemed to follow my thoughts. "Tomorrow is Halloween. There's no way three people can fix this mansion before Hecate gets back. It's

hopeless, isn't it?"

“Hey,” I said, “Halloween is the opposite of hopeless. Anything is possible on Halloween.”

Annabeth gave me a wistful look. I think she wanted to believe in the magic possibilities of Halloween, but the way things were going, she was doubting she’d get that perfect party she’d dreamed of. As for me, I meant what I said. I remembered the stories Mr. Brunner used to tell, back when I thought he was just a cool sixth-grade Latin teacher. He would talk about how ancient the traditions behind Halloween were—how almost every culture believed there was a time when the world of the living and the world of the dead came so close you could cross over.

The world of the dead …

My gaze drifted to Hecate’s torches crossed over the doorway.

They should be used only in the event of an extreme *emergency,* Hecate had said.

Chiron had been clear that the torches were too dangerous. If we tried to use them, especially on Halloween, an army of angry ghosts might tear us apart. Hecate must have left the torches as a kind of temptation, like the strawberry-milkshake potion. Sure, the choice was ours. But I’d seen Gale’s past now. I knew what kind of choices Hecate offered people who stood at a crossroads.

And yet …

“What if we could fix the house with magic?” I asked.

Grover followed my gaze. “Percy, no. You said the torches—”

“I know. Last resort. Just spitballing here.” I turned to Annabeth. “What do you think?”

Her expression was as distant as ancient Greece. She hesitated so long I got nervous. If I had a bad idea, she let me know right away. But when she hesitated like that, looking all serious—well, I’d seen that expression a lot when we were in Tartarus together. It usually meant she was thinking the

same thing I was—but with more nuance, and more understanding of all the horrible ways it could get us killed.

“For the sake of argument,” she said (which meant yeah, we were in serious trouble), “let’s say we tried. Hecuba, you know how to summon the dead. Is it possible we could use the torches successfully?”

Hecuba barked once. I figured that meant *Idiot!*

“She says no mortal has ever tried,” Grover translated. “She can’t do it for us. Her undead are only good for terrorizing people. If you used the torches and lost focus even for an instant, or couldn’t bend the spirits to your will, they would destroy everyone and everything in their path. Then they would devour your soul.”

Once again, I was impressed how much a dog could pack into just one bark. Their novels would be, like, twenty woofs long.

“What other options do we have?” I turned toward the staircase. “Hey, Gale! Come down here a sec, would you?”

A few seconds later, the polecat scurried down the steps. She was covered with flecks of raw chicken. Nope thought this was the most amazing thing ever. He began giving Gale a bath.

The polecat tolerated it pretty well. While Nope was busy with chicken removal, I told Gale what was going on. “Do you think you could brew anything that would help us? Like, give us magical building powers? Or at least shield us from the dead if we have to summon them?”

Gale seemed to think about this. She stood on her hind legs so Nope could clean her belly, which was both cute and slightly disturbing. She chattered and barked at Grover.

“Um—a lot of what she’s saying is really technical,” he said, “about herbs and reagents and distilling methods. She says there might be some recipes in the library. It’ll take her all day tomorrow. And she’ll need my help.”

“We can all help,” I offered.

“Except we can’t,” Annabeth said. “We *both* have tests at school tomorrow.”

Ugh. The *school* thing again. I wanted to argue that school wouldn’t mean much if we died for failing Hecate, but I knew better than to try.

Annabeth took our graduation plans seriously. Death was no excuse. She was determined that we would finish high school together so we could go to California and do at least four more years of even harder school.

Who had designed this system, anyway? When do you get to chill on the beach and stop working? And don’t tell me sixty-seven unless you want to see a demigod cry.

I reminded myself to be positive. Halloween. Anything is possible. Et cetera.

“That sucks,” I said, but in a positive way.

Grover sighed. “I get it. You don’t want to leave me alone with the animals again.”

“What?” I said. “No, man. That was my *I don’t like school* look, not my *I don’t trust Grover* look. I don’t even *have* that look.”

“I wouldn’t blame you if you did.” He straightened. “But please, let me watch the house tomorrow. I won’t let you down again.”

Annabeth started to answer. Then she met my eyes, maybe realizing that Grover needed to hear it from me.

“Of course,” I told him. “We trust you. We trust the animals.” I wagged a finger at Gale. “Just whatever you cook up in the kitchen, no strawberry, okay?”

Gale held up her little paw and chittered. Probable translation: *I solemnly swear—death before strawberries.*

“That’s settled, then.” Annabeth smiled, though her eyes were still stormy. “Who knows? We can’t summon the dead until after dark anyway.

Maybe we'll come up with a better plan in the meantime."

When I got back from brushing my teeth (not with cinnamon toothpaste—

never again!), Grover and the animals were asleep and snoring in a big pile.

I looked around for Annabeth. I was worried she might be buried under that mountain of cuddles. Then I noticed our makeshift front door was open.

I padded outside, past the three door knockers, still silent and safely wrapped in their cardboard box.

Annabeth stood on the sidewalk, leaning against the fence, staring back at the manse like … well, like an architect planning a job. I limped my way across the cranium-stone path and joined her at the gate. The facade of the mansion still looked terrible. More gray tombstone tiles had fallen off and broken in the front yard. More windows had shattered. I guess I hadn't noticed because I'd been so busy chasing animals around Manhattan.

"It's getting worse," I said.

Annabeth nodded.

"How?"

She hesitated. "Today, at the perfume shop … when I had the"—she circled her hand over her face, the universal gesture for *owl head*—"I sensed things in a totally different way. That must have happened to you, too. Something passed between you and Gale. You learned something?"

I wasn't sure how she'd guessed that, or what it had to do with the house falling down, but I told her everything she'd missed while she was at school, starting with Grover's attempt to ground himself under an army of squirrels.

Annabeth shook her head. "I'm going to kill him … in a loving way."

"He knows," I said.

Then I told her about my tentacle-sucker mind meld with the ferret.

She fidgeted with her camp necklace. I hadn't seen her do that in a long time. She turned one bead after another, as if reminding herself how many summers she had survived. Maybe it helped her believe she could survive one more day.

"Percy," she said, "I don't give you enough credit."

I blinked. "I'm sorry—can I get that in writing? Maybe on a billboard?"

She laughed. "I'm serious. You're good at understanding people, making them feel seen. And by *people*, I mean polecats and hellhounds, too."

"Thanks. I think."

She took my hand. "Back in Astoria, when the undead touched you …

you saw Hecuba when she was grieving, the moment she turned into a hellhound, yeah?"

I nodded. I could still hear Hecuba's anguished howls and feel the heavy Greek shackles around my ankles.

"Do you know what I saw?" Annabeth said. "I saw the city itself. Troy."

She tightened her grip on my fingers. "Your dad built those walls. Did you know that? The whole city was constructed with magic."

Maybe I'd heard that story before, but it still sounded strange to me. I couldn't imagine my dad as a bricklayer.

"I saw the city collapsing," Annabeth continued. "Hecuba was dragged out, her family was killed … and the magic unraveled. It's like the city's reason for existing just stopped. I could feel every column cracking, every support beam collapsing. I wanted to save the city. All those homes, temples, palaces. But I couldn't." She gave me a despondent look. "You saw the people; I saw the buildings. Why is that?"

I didn't answer right away. The obvious thing to say was *Because you're an architect-in-training!* But I knew that wasn't what she needed to hear.

She'd been sitting with this vision for a while now and it was clearly bothering her.

"Maybe you saw what you needed to see," I ventured. "A way to help Hecuba and us. You read people just fine, Wise Girl. Better than me. But architecture? Only one of us can do that."

As if on cue, another tombstone sloughed off the side of the manse, crashing into the garden.

I frowned. "We're not going to come up with a better plan to fix this place, are we?"

Annabeth shook her head. "We'll have to use the torches to summon the dead. *I'll* have to use the torches."

"Hold on—"

She squeezed my hand. "You said it yourself. I'm the architect. But this place was built by ghosts. That's the basis of Hecate's power. I'm going to need help … from someone ghostly, who knows about building in Manhattan."

I flashed back to the beginning of the week, when Annabeth and I had sat in her favorite cemetery near the School of Design. "You're not serious."

She didn't need to reply. She was dead serious. (Ouch, bad choice of words.)

"I'll do some research tomorrow at school," she said. "But yeah … I think it's my best shot."

I didn't like the way she said *my* best shot, like this was something I couldn't help with. I thought about her vision of Troy— *like the city's reason for existing just stopped*. I looked at the black iron trellis draped around Hecate's front porch like a huge mourning veil. I imagined I could hear the shriek of a frightened child, pedaling away down Gramercy Park West as fast as she could.

“I think …” I took a deep breath. “I think something has been wrong with this place since long before we got here.”

I told Annabeth about the ghost I’d been seeing, the display in the library from Hecate’s defunct school, and the collection of broken eyeglasses.

What Could Have Been.

Annabeth isn’t easy to surprise, but my words seemed to hit her like a spritz of Paralysis by Fancy Water.

“You’re saying …” She didn’t seem able to finish the thought.

“Something went wrong over a century ago,” I said. “Something that made Hecate close her school. Ever since, this place has been losing its reason to exist. I think Grover’s strawberry rampage just hurried things

along. Hecate’s been keeping Hecuba and Gale like prisoners, scared of them escaping. She’s been pushing people away—maybe prospective students, like those four naiads.”

“Like SEJ,” Annabeth said.

I nodded. “I don’t know what happened exactly, but if we’re going to try rebuilding this place with the help of ghosts, then we need to figure it out.

Which means I need to talk to SEJ. Sally Estelle Jackson.”

T W E N T Y- N I N E

I Get All the Candy

When Grover shook me awake, I felt like I'd been asleep for eight seconds.

Annabeth was already rushing out the door. She gave me a kiss. "Good luck."

Then she kissed Grover on the forehead and told him the same thing.

Five minutes later, I was out the door too with an incredible case of bed head and clothes covered in hellhound fur.

First stop: home. The apartment was empty, but it felt good to use a shower that didn't spit fire. I changed clothes and walked over to the Cracked Teapot.

My mom was at her favorite table, sipping herbal tea and staring at her laptop.

"Percy!"

She always greeted me with such enthusiasm. It was nice, except when I remembered it was partly because she was surprised to find me still alive.

She gave me a hug. "Do you need any breakfast? They have scones today."

This was a big selling point for my mom. Scones had never excited me, though. They always tasted like dehydrated muffin bricks.

"I'm good," I said. "Just wanted to let you know what's happening."

"Please!" she said. "Sounds much more fun than revisions."

I told her about my week at Hecate's. The more I talked, the more Mom tapped her fingers against her cup, like she was channeling all her worry into the porcelain. If she'd had my sea powers, she probably would've been stirring up a tempest in her teapot.

"Quite an ordeal," she conceded. "But at least you got the animals back."

"Yeah … except the hardest part is still to come. If this raising-the-dead thing doesn't work out—"

"Hey." She reached across the table and took my hand. It reminded me of when I was a little kid. Sometimes I'd felt like the world was spinning too fast. I couldn't process all the sounds and lights. My mom would tell me to

focus on holding her hand. She wouldn't let go until I felt steadier. "You're going to be fine," she said now.

It didn’t matter that her own hand was trembling. I knew she was as scared as I was. But that was okay as long as we were scared together.

“Yeah,” I said. “Of course.”

“Just support Annabeth. If she’s holding the torches, she’s going to need you tonight.”

“Is that a secret mom-life-hack?” I asked. “How you keep from getting too freaked out?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like … focus on the people you love. They need you; you can’t afford to get overwhelmed, so you keep it together.”

She laughed. “Maybe so. All I know is that you and Annabeth and Grover are going to get through this.”

Optimism—another of my mom’s superpowers.

I remembered my talk with Grover yesterday. He’d been so worried that he’d subconsciously sabotaged us so Annabeth and I couldn’t leave for California. I thought about the temptations Hecate had left in our path—the strawberry potion, the library, the torches—almost like she *wanted* us to fail.

Crossroads were Hecate’s thing. Whether I liked it or not, I was standing at one now. Everything was going to change one way or another. I just wished the options didn’t all feel so terrifying. Why couldn’t Hecate be waiting at the intersection with a helpful map and a selection of refreshing beverages?

My first meeting with her in the principal’s office, when she’d turned into a fiery triple-headed horrorfest, had been enough to reduce me to a terrified child with a loose bladder. I couldn’t imagine what it would be like for an actual child to encounter the goddess.

“I’ve got to ask you something.” I told my mom about the apparition I’d been seeing—the child on the bike, leaving behind a pair of broken glasses.

“That was you, wasn’t it?”

She stared at the steam coming off her teacup. “I wondered … when you mentioned Gramercy Park. So that *was* Hecate’s house.”

I’d been pretty sure I was right. Now that I knew, I had a sudden urge to take away all of Hecate’s candy corn. Certain things should be off-limits,

even for gods. Harassing my mom was at the top of that list—especially when she was a child.

I had a lot of questions. As usual, the most random thought came out first. “I didn’t know you wore glasses.”

She smiled wistfully, the way she does when she looks at old photographs. “I haven’t since that day. My family made me wear them because I was seeing things … differently.”

“Through the Mist.”

She’d always been able to do that. Some rare mortals could, but I’d never considered how hard that would’ve been for her as a kid.

“They were just trying to help,” she said. “They were worried. When other kids saw a mounted police officer riding down the street, I saw a pegasus. That kind of thing. We used to live near Gramercy Park West. One day, when I was riding my bike down the street, I saw that mansion, shifting and blending into the buildings around it. Those tombstone walls.”

“Yep,” I said. “Hecate definitely has an aesthetic.”

My mom frowned. “An old lady was standing on the porch. Just one head, and no fiery aura. She looked like a witch, though—black robes, white hair. She saw me on my bike, gawking at her house. I figured she would yell at me for staring, but instead she said something surprising.”

I remembered the voice from my vision. “Let me guess. ‘There is nothing wrong with your sight.’”

My mom nodded. “She flicked her hand at me and the glasses broke—

fell right off my face. Then she said, ‘You arrived too late. Move along.

Find another life.’ I was so scared …. Like I told you, I haven’t been back to Gramercy Park since. But afterward, when I looked through the Mist, I kind of understood what was happening. I told my family my eyes felt better. I learned not to mention the strange things I saw. In a way, Hecate helped me.”

I tried to imagine what it would’ve been like if Hecate’s school was still open back then. Would she have invited my mom inside to meet the hellhound and polecat? Would Sally Jackson have become a witch? I knew my mom could do anything she set her mind to. But that path would have been so different …. Would I ever have been born?

I felt like I needed to apologize, but I wasn’t sure what for. Hecate had scared her and hadn’t offered her a chance to learn magic. On the other hand, my mom had turned out great. Did I really want her to have a life like

Gale’s? Also, I had been born. I had to consider that a plus. So why did I feel guilty?

“Chiron told me that not all of Hecate’s ghosts are dead spirits,” I recalled. “He said the worst ones are memories and regrets … like choices we never made.”

She studied my face. She scooted her chair back and stood, which was getting increasingly difficult for her as the baby got bigger. “Come here, you.”

I got up and let her wrap me in a hug.

“That ghost you’re seeing?” she said. “That may be a memory, but I have no regrets.”

She held my shoulders and looked me in the eye. “My life is wonderful.

You are wonderful. I think you're seeing *Hecate's* regrets. If anyone needs your help and understanding, it's her."

That was the most Sally Jackson thing to say ever. A goddess had scared her, changed her life, and then years later threatened to incinerate her son if he didn't pet-sit her animals correctly. And my mom's reaction was *That poor immortal goddess must really be hurting. You should help her.*

"You'd better get going," she added. "You're going to be late for school.

Dinner tomorrow, after this is all over?"

Straight back into classic mom mode.

"You're right," I said. "Yeah. Dinner tomorrow. I'll try not to bring any undead with me."

She laughed. "I'd prefer to see Annabeth and Grover. But your friends are always welcome, dead or otherwise."

I had to hustle to school, but the stop had been worth it. The entire train ride to Queens, I was thinking *Yeah, I can do this!* rather than *Yeah, I'm going to die!*

I got through my tests and homework assignments. I pretended to know things. I guess my teachers appreciated the effort. Fourth period, I hoped to find Mr. Brunner still substituting, but my regular teacher, Dr. Sharma, had returned. She looked disappointed that I hadn't yet picked a forgotten historical figure for my project. I told her I was thinking about Gale from ancient Greece.

"Who?" she asked, then apparently realized I had passed the *forgotten* portion of the assignment. "Never mind. I look forward to reading it."

At lunchtime, I headed to the counselor's office. I didn't actually expect Eudora to be there, but this time I wasn't going to take AWOL for an answer.

I said hi to Sicky Frog, who stared at me dejectedly from his usual spot on the wall. At least I could leave whenever I wanted—he was stuck there. I sat

in a too-small plastic chair left over from AHS's past life as an elementary school. I stared at the empty space behind Eudora's desk.

"I know you can hear me," I said. "We need to talk."

I waited.

"Come on, Eudora," I cajoled. "I was just getting ready to tell my dad how great you've been as my counselor—always there for me, always helpful—"

"Percy!" Eudora swept into the office from whatever broom closet she'd been hiding in. "What a nice surprise!"

"You've been avoiding me," I said.

"What?" Her eye twitched behind her bottle-thick glasses. "Not at all!"

I stared at her.

A rivulet of seawater trickled down the side of her face from her seashell hairdo.

"It's not really *you*," she said. "It's just …"

"Hecate is terrifying," I guessed.

"Hecate *is* terrifying!" She exhaled, deflating into her chair. "Oh, cockleshells! When she took over the principal's office, I thought I would *die*, and I'm immortal! Have you seen what she's up to now?"

"I … What?"

She plucked a shell from her hairdo and set it on the desk. A tiny jet of water shot upward, making a miniature fountain. At the top of the spout, where the water curled back on itself like a mushroom cloud, an image rippled into clarity.

Hecate was dancing down a gravel path at night, following a crowd of costumed revelers through a graveyard. The partyers wore black robes

speckled with red. Their faces were painted chalky white. Some carried candles. Others bore plates of round pastries. Hecate held her torches out to either side and glowing spirits rose from the earth, joining the parade.

The souls flocked toward her, crowding around and clawing at her robes with their ghostly hands. When they got too close, Hecate crossed her

torches, making an X over her chest, and the spirits disappeared again like dust blown away in a breeze.

Hmm, interesting …

The crowd carried on. Hecate laughed and followed the celebration.

“Where is that?” I asked.

“The Philippines, I believe,” Eudora said. “They have a tradition called Pangangaluluwa—appeasing souls with food and festivity.” She shook her head. “I know I shouldn’t be doomsquirting, but I can’t help following her progress! If she makes her way back here, I do *not* want to run into her in the faculty lounge. Especially …”

She stopped herself, looking guiltily at me.

“Especially if I fail?” I asked.

“No! I’m sure you won’t fail.” She hesitated. “Will you?”

“Love the confidence.” I told her what we’d been doing all week and that we needed to put the mansion back in order before Hecate returned in the morning. “Any advice? Any gifts from the sea that might help?”

Eudora’s doomsquirt fountain fizzled out.

“Perhaps you should run and hide,” she said, solidifying her front-runner status for Guidance Counselor of the Year. “I should probably make arrangements to visit the Mariana Trench for the rest of the term.”

“Wait … why would Hecate come after *you*?”

The Nereid winced. She seemed so uptight, I was afraid one of us would dissolve into water and get flushed through the floor. That tended to happen in Eudora's office. Instead, she picked up her shell and returned it to her hair.

"I may have, ah, suggested you …" Eudora said. "For Hecate's task."

"You *what*?!"

She swallowed. "Hecate ambushed me! She showed up on Olympus and

… well, she asked me what I thought of you. I was shocked! She hadn't spoken to me since 1914! I—I was desperate to impress her. And foolishly

… I said you were quite competent."

"Thanks?"

"I panicked! And now, if you fail, that means *I* failed. Oh, she won't forgive me a second time."

"I still don't—Wait."

I'm a little slow on the uptake. But when a puzzle finally starts coming together, I can usually finish it without having to bash too many of the

pieces into place.

"A *second time*," I said. "Nineteen fourteen. That's the last year Hecate ran her magic school. You were part of that?"

Eudora stared at Sicky Frog. They looked equally miserable.

"The school was my idea," she confessed. "Hecate gets so *gloomy* when she's on her own. It's not healthy for her or her animals. I thought she would find it rewarding to teach young witches. And for a while, she did. I was the counselor and admissions director. I would bring promising students to her: demigods, mortals, nymphs, centaurs … all sorts. But when things fell apart …"

“What happened?”

She shrugged listlessly. “War. It’s *always* a war. Our students started taking sides, arguing with one another. It escalated from name-calling to violence to potion-flinging.”

“Potion-flinging is bad.”

Eudora nodded. “The students needed … more than we could give them.

Empathy. Opportunities for healthy communication. I didn’t know how to close the rift. And Hecate, well, she believes in crossroads, in people making their own choices, even if all the choices are bad. She refused to intervene. Things got nasty toward the end. Then she kicked everyone out, swore never to teach again. She blamed me for putting her in that position.”

“Oh.”

I felt bad for Eudora. It sounded like she’d been doing exactly what my mom had recommended—trying to help a goddess who was hurting. And it backfired spectacularly. I’d seen what could happen when infighting started among demigods—choosing sides, calling names, throwing blame and sometimes weapons. Just last summer, I’d watched two rival camps almost destroy each other and the whole world in the process. Hecate had sabotaged herself, just like she seemed to be sabotaging us now. I was going to have to take away her candy corn *and* her kürtőskalács.

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” I said.

Eudora sighed. “What was I thinking? A magic school! Can you imagine such a thing?”

“Yeah. Wild.”

“And now, if you leave her mansion in a state of disrepair …”

“Got it.”

“And *I* recommended you! I am a fool!”

“Don’t beat yourself up. A lot of people make the mistake of recommending me.”

She put her head in her hands. “All I wanted to do was help. So many talented young people in the world and they don’t all fit in the demigod camps! If Hecate still had her school, for instance, perhaps I could have placed those lovely nymph sisters after they fled Circe’s Island!”

“Ah, yeah. Them.”

“Instead, they went into retail!” She frowned. “I wonder how they’re doing ….”

I cleared my throat. This seemed like a good time to leave.

I stood, but I couldn’t make myself go when Eudora looked so distraught.

I didn’t have my mom’s talent for comforting people; still, I felt like I had to try.

“I won’t fail,” I told Eudora. “This won’t blow back on you.”

She looked up at me. “Are—are you sure?”

“Totally,” I said. This was totally a lie. I had no idea how to solve our problems. I just knew they had to be solved—for our sakes, and Eudora’s, and even Hecate’s. Maybe believing I could figure it out was the first step to figuring it out.

“This has been a great pep talk,” I told her. “You’ve inspired me.”

“I have?”

“You bet. Just one last thing for luck. Trick or treat?”

She stared at me. I pointed at the Jolly Ranchers.

“Oh,” she said.

I must’ve looked like I needed all the help I could get. She handed me the entire jar.

T H I RT Y

We Goo Up for Battle

I had swim practice that afternoon. Apparently, coaches don’t believe in giving the day off for Halloween. Big meanies. At one point, in the middle of practice, I remembered that, oh, right, we had invited our friends to the manse tonight. I’d forgotten to ask Grover to cancel the party. Maybe Grover and Annabeth had already taken care of it. Or maybe I was holding on to the totally unrealistic hope that by the time the party rolled around, we would’ve fixed everything.

By the time I got back to Gramercy Park West, night was falling. Groups of little kids and their parents were wandering the streets, trick-or-treating at stores and townhouses. I figured the older candy bandits and partygoers would wait until full dark. So would the real ghosts, ghouls, and whatever else we were able to summon from beyond the grave.

I found Annabeth, Grover, and the pets in Hecate's kitchen. Annabeth had spread books and maps across a steel tabletop like she was planning a ground assault.

"Good, you made it," she told me.

Not the warm greeting I'd been hoping for, but Annabeth got like that whenever she was in mastermind mode. She started juggling a thousand factors in her head, preparing for every possible situation. Sometimes that made her see me as another asset for the plan rather than her boyfriend.

Once in a while, that was okay with me. As long as I was an asset and not a liability.

"Here's what we've got." She pointed at a city engineer's schematic of Lower Manhattan. "Saint Mark's Church in-the-Bowery. Like I figured, it's got one of the nearest cemeteries. It's also the burial place of Peter Stuyvesant—you know, the Dutch colonial officer? We're trying to figure out the least-crowded route coming back."

The idea of raiding a church graveyard on Halloween made me uneasy. It was bad enough having the Greek gods mad at me. I didn't need to be on Jesus's naughty list, too.

"What if Pete doesn't want to help us?" I asked.

Annabeth frowned. "I'm not going to lie—by all accounts, Stuyvesant wasn't a nice guy. He was hot-tempered, prejudiced, rude, kind of a dictator."

"Wow. I'm sold."

“But he’s also the guy who built up this part of New Amsterdam back in the 1600s, before it became New York under the British. His spirit is woven into the roots of the city. Plus, he was efficient. He got stuff done. If anyone can oversee a supernatural house repair in just one night, it’s him.”

“And it’s only a fifteen-minute walk from the manse,” Grover added.

“We go in, get our spirits, and get out.”

“You make it sound like a bank heist,” I said.

Hecuba barked, nearly startling me out of my socks.

“Thanks, Hecuba.” Grover scratched her behind the ear. “She says she’ll be with us the whole way. She and Nope will do their best to herd the ghosts. Her advice is to stay focused on what you want from the spirits.

Keep your goal clearly in your mind. Otherwise, the dead will fade away, or worse, they’ll go berserk ….”

“Devour our souls, et cetera,” I guessed. “Good to know.”

Nope looked up at me with a big grin, like devouring souls sounded fun to him.

“Also, Gale made us this.” Annabeth pushed a mixing bowl toward me.

Inside were three pasty globs of yellow goo. Except for the color, they reminded me a little too much of our anti-beast-breath concoction from yesterday.

“Please don’t tell me we have to eat it,” I said. “I don’t need to see anybody else throwing up toenails.”

“It goes on our skin,” Annabeth said. “Should keep the dead at bay, at least for a while.”

“But that’s not enough to cover all three of us.”

Gale chittered for a few seconds, giving us her professional opinion.

Grover translated. “She says you don’t have to cover yourself. Magic lotion is like bug repellent. If you just dab your wrists and either side of your neck, it will do the job.”

I made a note to try that with repellent next time I was at camp. We had some epic-size mosquitos in the woods.

“Good work, Gale,” I said. “You really came through.”

She preened, looking quite pleased with herself.

It was enough to make me feel almost confident. A few days ago, I could barely imagine surviving our twice-daily walks with the pets. Now Hecuba and Gale were our friends—part of our team.

“Thank you,” I told the animals. “It’s an honor to be summoning dead New Yorkers with you.”

“Nope!” said Nope.

“And you, buddy,” I agreed. “You’re going to terrify them with cuteness.”

“Nope!” agreed the hellpuppy.

I looked at Annabeth’s map. I tried to stay positive as I thought about what we were going to do.

“I got some intel at school,” I said. “I saw the way Hecate uses her torches.”

I told them what I’d seen in the counselor’s office—how the goddess held her torches outstretched to summon the dead, then crossed her arms over her chest to turn the spirits to dust.

When I told them what I’d learned about my mom, Annabeth put her hand over her mouth. “Oh my gods. Sally as a witch?”

Grover nodded. “She would have crushed that.” Then he looked at me and added hastily, “But I’m glad you were born, of course.”

When I told them about Eudora’s past career, Hecuba’s ears went back.

She whined plaintively. Gale scrambled over to her and put her paws around the hellhound’s neck. It was kind of heartbreaking.

“You liked Eudora,” I guessed.

Hecuba whimpered.

“Yeah,” I said. “I think Eudora liked you both, too. She misses you. And the school.”

Gale gave me a stern look, like, *Dude, stop making my friend cry.*

“Right,” I said. “Sorry.”

Annabeth scanned the smashed cabinetry and dented appliances in the kitchen. “That history could be a problem. If this place has been deteriorating for over a century because Hecate can’t let go of the past, even an army of ghosts won’t be able to fix that. We can try repairs, but it’ll be like patching cracks in the walls when the support beams are failing.”

I assumed that was an architectural thing. I nodded like it made sense to me.

“One problem at a time,” I suggested. “Let’s get the dead to paint the cracks first. Then we’ll worry about the support beams.”

Annabeth chewed her lip. “That’s … really not how construction works, but I guess you’re right.” She held out her arms like a traffic cop. “So, I keep my arms outstretched to summon the dead and direct their work.

When we’re done, I cross the torches in front of me. Sounds straightforward.”

Grover leaned over the table map. “I think this route here would have the fewest people coming back. Cut through, side street, side street. Then cross

to Irving Place and head straight north."

Leading the dead through dark alleys also did not sound like a best practice. On the other hand, I wasn't going to argue with Grover when it came to finding paths through the wild. Besides, if I complained, I would dishonor the name of Alley Boy.

"Okay," I said. "Let's goo up."

Grover did the honors, anointing us with Gale's yellow paste on our wrists and necks, which made us smell like burning polyester. Maybe ghosts were allergic to synthetic fabrics.

With apologies to Hecuba and Gale, we got the animals harnessed and leashed. Not that we didn't trust Hecuba and Gale, but Nope was still trying to decide whether his leash was a toy, a meal, or something to pee on. We figured the grown-up pets might set a good example.

"I'll get the torches for you," I told Annabeth. Then I jogged up the stairs.

Annabeth was totally capable of getting the torches herself. But I wanted to hold them first just in case they electrocuted me, possessed me, or made me grow two extra faces. If that were going to happen to one of us, it should have been me, the guy who didn't know a support beam from a laser beam.

Instead, the torches came off their plaque on the railing with no problem.

They were nothing fancy, just two wooden batons with tar-soaked rags wrapped around the business end.

I glanced down at Annabeth, who was frowning at me.

I grinned and spun the torches in slow motion like Bruce Lee with nunchakus.

"Uh-huh," she said. "Bring those to me, Seaweed Brain. I'm not sure I trust you with flammable objects."

Finally, we were ready to head out into the evening.

“Remember,” Grover said, “it’s only ten blocks or so, but the souls will be fighting us every step. Once we’ve got them, we need to make sure they stay on task. Not just Annabeth. All of us have to focus.”

Focus was not my favorite word, being ADHD and all. Sure, I could focus on something important in an emergency, like an ax swinging toward my head. But focusing on an idea for fifteen minutes while under stress, while moving, and after having been told to focus? My mind’s natural tendency would be to wander and think about literally anything else: pizza, streetlights, grades, the many ways I could die walking ten-plus blocks.

I took one more look around the shattered great room. I felt like I was forgetting something important. Eels? No. Candy corn? No. Gladiator loincloth? No thank you.

“Okay,” I said. “I guess we’re good.”

File that statement under *Top Ten Times Percy Was Wrong*.

T H I RT Y- O N E

We Find Some Different Dead Guys St. Mark’s Church looked different at night. It was on 10th Street near Second Avenue, across from a convenience store and an Urban Outfitters, but the church felt like it was in the middle of nowhere—an island of darkness behind its iron fence and wooded yard.

We passed the bench where Annabeth and I had talked on Monday. At the time, it had seemed like a nice place to hang out. Now it seemed like a nice place to get mugged or swarmed by angry spirits.

The gates were black and, like the Aeaea perfumery, decorated with Greek key designs. (Warning! Mythological mayhem inside!) We slipped through and into the cemetery.

More trees, grass, benches. I couldn’t see any headstones, but Annabeth assured me the ancient graves were there under the brick pathways, gnarled tree roots, and thick ivy. I believed her. The air felt ten degrees cooler.

Ground fog clung to my ankles. I hadn’t been in a place this creepy since fifteen minutes ago, when we’d left Hecate’s.

Hecuba and Nope sniffed around, pulling my arms in different directions.

The area probably smelled like a high-end buffet to them.

We had the place to ourselves. Out on the avenue, traffic flowed.

Pedestrians went about their business. But the bustling mortal world seemed muted and far away, like we’d already crossed through a veil into the world of the dead. I didn’t like that idea.

“Pete?” I called into the gloom. “Where you at?”

Annabeth elbowed me. “Maybe let’s not call him *Pete* until we get to know him. His crypt is over there.”

She led us to the side of the church. Under a stained-glass window, at ground level, a dark stone marker was affixed to the wall: IN THIS VAULT LIES

PETRUS STUYVESANT.

There were more words after that, but I was too nervous to read them.

Probably they were the fine print, warning what would happen if Pete’s spirit was disturbed. *Results may vary. Do not let ghosts operate heavy machinery. Seek divine help if your dead last longer than twelve hours.*

Gale barked, leaping from Grover’s shoulder to mine.

“She says we’d better start,” Grover translated. “The goo is only effective for a few hours at most.”

I wondered if the polecat could feel my shoulders shaking. “Okay.

Annabeth, you good?”

She hefted the unlit torches. It occurred to me that I should’ve brought a box of matches.

“Ready,” she said. “Just help me by concentrating on what we need.”

Right, I thought. I want the spirits to rebuild a haunted house. If this went well, we could start our own show on the Home DIY Channel: *Renovated to Death*.

Already, I wasn’t doing well staying focused. I was about to suggest we take a minute, maybe practice some meditative breathing, but it was too late.

Annabeth stretched out her arms and the torches blazed to life on their own.

Blue-and-white flames cast a sickly glow across the old stone wall, glinting on the stained glass. The depictions of saints leaped and danced in a way that wasn’t at all creepy.

Concentrate, I told myself.

I closed my eyes. That didn’t help. My mind just raced with more wild ideas. I focused on the stone marker. I imagined Hecate’s mansion being rebuilt. With pizza toppings. *Stop it, brain!* I hoped the rest of the gang was having better luck.

The ground trembled. Annabeth almost lost her balance, but she regained her bearings quickly. Gale jumped off my shoulder and hid behind me. The polecat was no fool. If the ghosts turned angry, much better to let them devour the big, juicy demigods.

The fire warmed the air. Blue light danced across my arms, making me look like a corpse—and I really didn’t need that analogy.

Hecuba growled as the specter appeared. It rose against the wall like a shadow— *Annabeth’s* shadow. Then the dark silhouette deepened, peeling itself from the bricks and taking on a smoky form like a cloud of coal dust. I sensed its aggravation, confusion, anger. It was asking a question. *Why?*

Next to me, Nope let loose a torrent of pee. Not going to lie—I had the same instinct. Somehow, I managed to keep myself together.

I didn't know if this ghost was Peter Stuyvesant himself or some other poor schmuck, but I tried to communicate an image of the manse in Gramercy Park. I pictured the damage being repaired.

Beads of perspiration dotted Annabeth's face.

"You're doing great," I murmured.

I didn't know if she heard me. She had the expression of somebody arm-wrestling a Hyperborean giant. (And yes, I've seen that.) The smoke thickened. The ghost took on a more definite shape. He had a broad-brimmed hat; long, stringy hair; a cape; a doublet; and puffy breeches

—all made from swirling dust particles. A rapier hung at his side.

I wondered if we'd raised one of the Three Musketeers. I was starting to fret about where the other two might be. Then I noticed the ghost was leaning on a cane. His right leg ended in a wooden peg.

"It's him," Grover whispered in my ear. "They called him Peg-Leg Pete."

"Isn't that a cartoon character?" I whispered back.

"Different Peg-Leg Pete."

"How do you know this?"

"I did the assigned reading."

I glanced at him. He wasn't kidding. Apparently, Annabeth had given him homework on Pete. Either I'd forgotten about it, or Annabeth hadn't bothered giving it to me because she knew it was hopeless.

"Boys." Annabeth gritted her teeth. "Help."

Right. Focus.

I went back to imagining Hecate's house. I broadcast mental pictures of hammers, nails, paint, and duct tape. Did they have duct tape in the seventeenth century? I imagined us all taking a stroll up to Gramercy Park for a fun evening of do-it-yourself home renovation.

Hecuba gave us another low growl—a sort of heads-up.

More shadowy forms were rising from the ground. Soon a crowd of ghosts surrounded us—dozens at least.

Grover reined in Nope, who really wanted to meet the smoke people. He must have gotten over his initial fright. His barking was joyous, like, *YOU!*

SMELL! INTERESTING! The noise didn't help me concentrate.

Gale chittered, probably reminding us that we were on the clock. How long had we been here? Minutes? Decades? The ghosts closed in, invading our personal space like we were the newest dead on the block and they

needed to size us up. They didn't touch us, though. So far, Gale's goo seemed to be doing its job.

Why? the ghosts asked.

They didn't like us. Their hostility tinged the air like sulfur. They knew Annabeth wasn't Hecate—not a goddess to fear, just a teenager with borrowed torches.

They crowded around, swirling, sniffing us, held at bay only by Gale's anti-ghoul salve and Annabeth's willpower. Their presence drained the strength from my limbs. I didn't know how Annabeth could stand it.

Their thoughts and memories washed over me. I saw New Amsterdam as a young colony—just a few buildings clustered around the southern tip of the island. Farmland stretched around us, alongside woods and streams. I felt bitterness. I saw frowning faces, heard insults being shouted in Dutch.

Peter and his friends apparently hadn't been well-liked. They had been buried here, in what was then the far northern edge of the settlement.

They'd been slumbering in their graves for centuries as New York rose around them, burying almost every trace of their lives, eroding the names on their gravestones, making it impossible for them to sleep with all the traffic and construction. Now they were disoriented and angry.

I couldn't blame them. *Resting in peace* wasn't something that happened a lot in Manhattan.

I get it, I thought. *But we need your help. Follow Annabeth. Work for her.*

I wasn't sure how helpful I was being. I was too distracted worrying about Annabeth, who must have been taking the brunt of the ghosts' anger.

The torches burned brighter, turning a deeper blue, almost violet.

Annabeth's arms trembled.

"You okay?" I asked.

"I—I'm good," she managed.

I wanted to believe her, but the smoky forms kept multiplying. The whole graveyard seemed to have risen—hundreds of souls from unmarked graves, their names forgotten, their identities erased over the centuries. They thought in Dutch, English, French, and Algonquin—a chaotic chorus I couldn't follow, but the emotions were clear enough. They wanted to tear us apart. They were just waiting for a sign from Peg-Leg Pete.

Annabeth straightened. She looked right into the sooty eyes of Peter Stuyvesant. "You will help us," she commanded. "Follow me."

Stuyvesant's dust particles churned with resentment. But I felt something else now, too: curiosity, cold amusement, a cruel desire to see how long Annabeth could hold herself together before she broke. His response hissed in my mind. *Go on, then, girl.*

Annabeth turned and led us out of the graveyard.

T H I RT Y- T W O

Passing the Torch Works Out Super Well One block.

That’s how far we made it.

Annabeth led us across 11th Street, then through Grover’s recommended shortcut—a pedestrian path between two apartment buildings. The mortals we passed gave us a wide berth. Through the Mist, I imagined we looked like a Halloween tour group. *Please follow the torches for the Ghosts and Goblins Walk!*

Hecuba and Nope went into border-collie mode. With their leashes dragging behind them, they raced around the spirits, making sure they all stayed in a

tight herd. I guess that's what hellhounds did down in the Underworld, because Nope took to it instinctively.

"Nope!" he barked every time a ghost strayed. "Nope! Nope!"

There would be no side trips for ice cream on this walking tour.

We had just emerged onto 12th Street when Annabeth stumbled.

I managed to catch her left arm and keep the torch from dropping. Grover did the same on her right. The ghosts surged toward us, then ebbed back when Annabeth regained her balance. I got the feeling they'd been about a half second away from feeding on our immortal souls.

"I made a mistake," Annabeth said.

Her breathing was ragged. Her legs wobbled like she'd just climbed all the way to Olympus.

"What can we do?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I'm not … going to have … enough strength … to get there."

Gale climbed onto Grover's shoulder. She chittered nervously, tapping her tiny wrist where her tiny watch would have been if she'd had one. We were going too slowly. Goo was a-wasting.

The ghosts swirled around us, seething with bitterness. Pete the Musketeer watched like a wolf waiting for the right moment to strike weakened prey. His hand rested on the hilt of his shadowy rapier.

Grover and I exchanged a panicked look. If Annabeth was admitting she'd made a mistake, we were in serious trouble. All heroes had fatal flaws. Annabeth's was pride. She always aimed as high as possible, confident she could go even higher. Most of the time, she was right. But calling for help after one block? The situation had to be desperate for her to swallow her pride like that.

Then I remembered why fatal flaws were called *fatal*.

We couldn't let her get worn-out so soon. She was the only one who could direct the ghosts to rebuild the house properly.

"Let me take the torches," I said.

Hecuba growled.

"That's not a great idea," Grover translated. "If you break the summoning

__"

"I can do it," I insisted. "Walking these guys back to the manse—that I can handle. We need Annabeth fresh when we get there so she can take over."

Hecuba made a sound between a grunt and a whimper.

"She doesn't know if you can pass the torches from one person to another," Grover said. "No one has ever tried that before."

I met Annabeth's eyes. "*We* can."

I figured that, after holding the weight of the sky and trekking through Tartarus together, the two of us were about as in sync as a couple could be.

There might not be any *I* in team, but there was definitely an *A* for Annabeth and … three other letters that didn't really stand for anything, so let's forget I said that. The point was, we were great collaborators. I wasn't sure of much else, but I was sure of that.

I faced her, nose to nose, and held out my arms to match hers.

"It's okay." I wrapped my hands over hers on the torch handles. "Let me help."

She loosened her grip and fell back into Grover's arms.

The ghosts whirled into an angry storm of dust and smoke, but I kept the torches aloft and channeled my best mental hellpuppy voice. *NOPE!*

The spirits calmed. Or at least, they went back to their baseline level of homicidal rage.

“You’re going to follow me to Gramercy Park,” I ordered. “And you’re going to like it.”

For the first .00035th of a second, I felt pretty confident. The torches weren’t *that* heavy. The hissing voices and emotional onslaught from the dead weren’t *that* bad.

But by the time we got to Third Avenue, I was starting to think Grover was right. I needed to work out more. The torches felt like anvils. I was running a serious deficit of muscles and stuff. Sweat poured down my back.

I realized I wasn’t just carrying the torches—I was dragging an entire army of reluctant dead people behind me. They were making it as hard as they could, digging in their ghostly heels. Stuyvesant hovered nearby, watching me with amusement. *And now this boy thinks he can control us.*

Watch me, Pete, I growled back.

I kept going, fixing my mind on our destination. *The manse. Just get back to the manse.*

Annabeth seemed a little better, at least. She limped along at my side, her face set in concentration, trying to help me psychically shepherd the dead.

The hellhounds barked and raced around the edges, nipping at ghostly heels. Grover trotted ahead of us with Gale on his shoulder, blazing a trail through the wilds of the East Village.

“This way!” he urged. “One hoof in front of the other!”

Our strange procession staggered north. The torches became heavier. The flames scalded my forearms. Every so often, out of the corner of my eye, I

spotted a random new ghost crawling out of the sidewalk or emerging from a wall to join our parade. Great … for once, I was popular.

I lost track of time. My vision blurred. I felt like I was turning to smoke, blending into the spirit mob until I was nothing but jumbled feelings and fuzzy memories.

I was vaguely aware that Annabeth had jogged ahead to confer with Grover.

“… no supplies,” Grover was saying. “Should we stop somewhere?”

“Don’t worry,” Annabeth said. “We’ll figure it out.”

I was glad we wouldn’t be making that detour. I imagined dragging my army of ghosts into Home Depot and asking where we could find drywall and plaster.

The thought distracted me. I tripped on a crack. The torches guttered. The ghosts swarmed me.

“Percy!” Annabeth’s voice shocked me back into focus.

I raised the torches higher. The ghosts retreated, whispering insults.

Stuyvesant’s face was only a swirl of soot, but I was pretty sure he was leering at me.

“That was close,” Annabeth said. “Just keep going. You’re doing great.”

I staggered on as more and more spirits joined our procession. Traffic sounds became soft and damp like noises heard underwater. Pedestrians parted around us in slow motion, ignoring the torches and angry dead people.

Gale barked, helpfully urging me to pick up the pace. The smell of burning polyester was fading as the magic salve on my skin dried out and crumbled off my neck and wrists.

“It’s fine,” Annabeth told me. “It’s all fine.”

Proof positive that things were not fine.

Just get to the manse, I told myself.

I repeated those words so often they started to lose meaning. I hallucinated that Hecate was dancing in front of me, coaxing me to follow her. Her face split into three fiery guises—the horse, the lion, and the dog. I couldn't for the life of me remember what they symbolized. I just knew I couldn't meet their eyes.

I was approaching my final crossroads, like Hecate's school did in 1914.

I remembered what Hecate had said at our first meeting: *I devour those who waver before me.* She wouldn't help me choose a path. She would just watch to see which version of failure I picked.

At my side, the ghost of Peter Stuyvesant laughed softly. His peg leg had no substance, but it made an otherworldly *clunk* whenever it struck the pavement.

"Percy, almost there," Annabeth said. "Look."

We'd made it to the north end of Irving Place. Ahead of us stretched Gramercy Park West. On our left, only half a block away, rose the gray facade of the manse.

I could do this.

My legs were as heavy as cast iron, but a surge of anger gave me strength. Hecate didn't reward hesitation? Fine.

I growled—probably saying something really inappropriate in Hellhound

—and marched straight ahead through the hallucinatory vision of Hecate.

We made it to the mansion's gate.

Annabeth and Grover hurried to either side of me. They braced my arms, and together we lurched up the cranium-stone path. The torch flames

guttered again, cooling to a dark red. Somehow, we made it to the front porch.

The ghosts milled about the yard, waiting for orders or a chance to kill us. They reminded me of large, angry, spectral garden gnomes, which fit right in with the manse's vibe.

"My turn," Annabeth said.

Brave words, but she still looked exhausted. I wasn't any better. We'd barely managed to transfer the torches before. If we tried now, I was afraid we'd end up setting ourselves on fire, burning down the manse, and then getting eaten by garden ghouls.

I forced a few words from my dry throat. "How about … together?"

Grover started to object, but Hecuba's bark cut him off. Gale added a few urgent chirps.

I got the message without a translation. *Whatever you're going to do, do it now!*

The ghosts were getting restless. They had reached my chosen destination. Now what? Maybe could they rip us into bite-size pieces?

Meanwhile, Nope, oblivious to our danger, was trying to chomp the end of Stuyvesant's shadow sword.

"Okay," Annabeth said. "Together."

She put her arm around my waist. She reached out for the torch in my right hand.

"Let me do the thinking," she warned.

"Gladly," I croaked.

She took the torch.

Wow, that was a relief. Suddenly only the left side of my body felt like it was dissolving in acid. On my right I had Annabeth, which was much better. I put my free arm around her waist. We held each other tight.

The torches blazed, heating up again to a bright blue flame.

Annabeth faced our surly mob of followers. “Fix the house,” she said.

“Then you’ll be free.”

Behind us, the makeshift front door blasted open. The army of spirits rushed the front porch, parting around us like we were a rock in the rapids, and swept into the manse.

“Oh,” Grover said in a small voice. “I’m sure that’s fine.”

Annabeth and I managed to turn so we could watch the spirits’ progress.

Fortunately, we’d had some practice doing three-legged races at camp.

Miniature tornadoes swirled through the great room. The dead cleared the broken glass, repaired the furniture, and painted the walls with sheets of ghostly frost. Above us, more ghosts swept across the building’s facade, mending the cracked tombstones and replacing those that had fallen.

“Percy,” Annabeth said weakly, “it’s going to work!”

I tried to smile, but even lifting the corners of my mouth felt like too much effort. I stayed focused on the task: *Fix the house.* Otherwise, I let Annabeth do the thinking.

The ghosts did all the heavy lifting, but it felt like they were draining the life force right out of me. The more they did, the more my legs shook. Only Stuyvesant remained aloof from the uproar. He probably considered himself above menial labor. He floated here and there, monitoring repairs, hissing orders in Dutch, and letting his home-jongens do all the work.

Grover, Hecuba, and Gale stood in the front yard, stunned into silence.

Nope, who must have sensed we needed support, padded behind us, wedged his head between Annabeth's leg and mine, and rested his snout on my shoe. Honestly, that was the best cute-puppy assist I could have asked for.

I don't know how long the process took. Hours? Centuries? My sight dimmed. My brain wobbled in my skull like a gyroscope.

Finally, Annabeth said, "It's done."

The ghosts belched out of the house in a flood of gray ectoplasm and reassembled in the yard.

I looked at their results. The mansion was exactly as it had been when we arrived on Monday. The windows were all fixed. The three-paneled door gleamed with a new coat of paint. The ghosts had even polished and replaced the door knockers, which looked as astonished as pieces of metal can look.

"That was incredible!" said the lion.

"That was horrible!" said the horse.

"STROOPWAFELS!" said the dog.

So the door knockers worked again. Yay.

Annabeth and I turned to survey the troops.

Hundreds of ghosts hung above the lawn like columns of campfire smoke. Stuyvesant limped back and forth in front of them, his spectral peg leg clunking against the cranium path. The dead were waiting, but I knew

they were at the end of their patience. They felt no sense of accomplishment. They only wanted one thing: release. Also, revenge. Okay, they wanted two things. We needed to dismiss them quickly and send them back to their graves.

"Ready?" Annabeth asked me. "One, two, three."

She started pulling in her torch. I did the same. The idea was simple: Do what Hecate had done. Cross the torches in front of us and hope the spirits turned to dust and went bye-bye.

The problem was, my left arm rebelled. I had nothing left. No muscles.

No stuff. Just bringing the torch toward my chest felt like trying to close a rusty airplane-hangar door with one hand. I took a breath, dug deep to find whatever remained of my strength, and gave it one last shot.

“Percy?” Grover asked in alarm.

“Percy!” Annabeth said.

“Sorry …” I muttered.

My last shot was a miss. Black spots danced in my eyes. I crumpled to my knees, and the torch fell out of my hand.

T H I RT Y- T H R E E

We Have a Good Old-Fashioned Witch Burning. (It’s Us. We’re the Witches.)

In the demigod business, we have a technical term for situations like this.

We call them *bad*.

I collapsed on the porch. The ghosts rushed in, ready to feast.

Fortunately, there was Annabeth. (That sentence describes a lot of my life, actually.) She lunged, snatched the fallen torch before the flames could gutter out completely, and positioned herself between me and the dead.

“Get back!” she yelled. “Begone!”

She crossed the torches in front of her, the way Hecate had done in Eudora’s waterspout. The spirits crashed against the edge of the torchlight and reeled backward, hissing and howling, but they didn’t disappear. They raged through the front yard, rattling the fence, then zipped up and down Gramercy Park West with such force they shook streetlamps and peeled flagstones off the sidewalk.

Annabeth muttered, “Why aren’t they going away?”

(That sentence also describes a lot of my life.) I was too worn-out to respond. Maybe we’d messed things up by passing the torches between us. I tried to get up, but my chest hurt. My arms were limp spaghetti. Nope valiantly tried to help by tugging at the hem of my jeans, but it was no use.

Grover, Hecuba, and Gale rushed to join us on the porch, because that’s where all the cool kids who didn’t want to get eaten by ghouls were.

“Not good, not good, not good,” Grover fretted. “What do we do?”

Gale barked and ran inside the mansion, though this seemed like a bad time for a chicken-carcass break. Hecuba stood her ground, growling at the blizzard of ghosts.

“We’re going to die!” said the lion door knocker.

“We’ll be fine!” said the horse.

“I’m gonna stick with STROOPWAFELS!” said the dog.

For the moment, the torchlight seemed to be keeping the dead at bay.

They tore up the street and ripped limbs off the trees in the park in

frustration, but the manse itself appeared to be within the protective radius of the blue fire.

We needed to keep it that way. Whatever else happened, we couldn't let the ghosts wreck the mansion and undo all our hard work. Okay, all *their* hard work, but still …

"These are getting heavy." Annabeth's arms shook under the weight of the torches. "I don't know how much longer I can keep the ghosts out."

Gale reemerged from the mansion, dragging a bandolier of little glass vials behind her. She dropped them at Grover's feet and chittered urgently.

"She says you both need these!" Grover fumbled with the vials, pulled the stopper from one, and dribbled the contents into my mouth. I worried I might turn into Octopus Boy again, develop beast breath, or go full flaming purple armadillo, but I wasn't in any shape to protest. I gulped it down. A surge of warmth washed through my organs.

I recognized the sensation. It was nectar—the drink of the gods. The flavor varied every time I tried it. Usually, the taste reminded me of some favorite form of comfort food. This time … it was candy corn.

The taste brought me back to kindergarten. I was trick-or-treating with my mom in our apartment building. Everybody was giving out little bags of candy corn …. I guess because there'd been a sale at Duane Reade. I got such a stomachache I swore I'd never eat the stuff again.

It was a simple memory, but it was enough to clear my head. My arms tingled. I struggled to my feet. While Grover poured nectar into Annabeth's mouth, I managed to pull out Riptide and uncap the blade without decapitating myself.

I still felt awful. It would've taken another twenty or thirty vials to get me back to full strength, but I knew that wasn't possible. In small amounts, ambrosia and nectar did wonders for demigods. In larger amounts, they could make you spontaneously combust, which didn't fit in with my healthy lifestyle.

"Thanks, Grover, Gale." I jabbed my blade at the nearest ghost, who was getting a little too close to the edge of the torchlight. "How's everybody feeling?"

“Fine,” Grover said. “Just an average night, you know.”

“Squeak!” said Gale.

The dogs snarled in their respective sizes: extra large and child’s medium.

“I’m better.” Annabeth waved the torches at the spirit mob. “Not great, but I’ll manage.”

Years ago, when she’d been Atlas’s prisoner, she’d held up the sky for much longer than I had. I knew she had next-level stamina. Still, I didn’t want her carrying those torches any longer than she had to. Oh, wait …

carrying a torch for someone. Wasn’t that an old-fashioned way to say you loved somebody? That was kind of sweet.

Stop that! I told myself. *Focus!*

“Maybe if we keep holding them off,” I suggested, “they’ll eventually get bored and drift away?”

Annabeth frowned. “Until when, morning? It just got dark.”

“I’m trying to be optimistic here.”

The ghosts attacked. In wave after wave, they threw themselves at the circle of blue light. Each time one got close to the flames, the spirit disintegrated, only to re-form at the far end of the yard. Great, they had multiple lives. Why didn’t *I* have multiple lives?

So far, the torches were keeping them at bay, but the ghosts kept trying.

With each assault, Annabeth flinched and swayed like she was weathering a gauntlet of punches.

Hecuba barked.

“She says the lead ghost is holding them together,” Grover told us. “They won’t leave before they’ve broken through.”

“So we’re in a standoff,” I said.

“Time is not on my side,” Annabeth warned. The torchlight was already starting to dim and cool. Her hair picked up streaks of gray from the light, like she was aging before my eyes.

“What did we ever do to them?” I grumbled. “Besides making them work on Halloween night? What do they want?”

I was immediately sorry I’d asked.

A howl rose from the mob. Frost crackled across Hecate’s garden. The ranks of ghosts parted, and Stuyvesant limped forward, so dark and solid now he might have been sketched with a smudge stick.

Your heretic souls, his voice whispered in my mind. *You must burn. The witch’s house must burn.*

“Oh, yeah?” Grover called back. “Well, joke’s on you, Pete. Some of us don’t *have* souls! I’ll just reincarnate … probably as a pumpkin patch if I die on Halloween, but that’s not so bad!”

For some reason, this failed to discourage Stuyvesant. He drew his coal-dust rapier. *Witches must burn.*

He really seemed stuck on that point. I was starting to think that raising a dude from the 1600s to rebuild the manse might not have been the best plan.

“This isn’t just *any* witch’s house,” I said. “This place belongs to Hecate, the goddess of magic. You’re messing with the wrong real estate!”

The ghosts shrieked in outrage, nearly rupturing my eardrums. The spirits swirled together into a massive funnel cloud of ice and dust, and then splintered off in every direction—wisps of ghostly gray racing into the night. Even Peg-Leg Pete disappeared.

The yard fell silent except for the crackling of the torches.

“You—you think they gave up?” I asked.

Somewhere down the block, a scream cut through the night. A car honked. Metal crunched against metal.

“Nope,” Annabeth guessed.

“Nope!” barked Nope.

When the ghosts came back, they were wearing upgrades.

Some shambled along in piles of garbage that formed vaguely human shells of plastic bags, aluminum cans, tattered blankets, and fast-food boxes. They would have gotten solid grades on SODNYC’s “recycled clothing” project. Other ghouls had apparently ripped the costumes off unsuspecting trick-or-treaters. I spotted characters from Star Wars, some superheroes, pretty princesses, and a whole bunch of Mickey and Minnie Mouses like they were on their way to work the crowds at Times Square. It was horrifying.

Even worse, trailing behind the trash- and costume-ghosts were actual living people. They moved like they had forgotten how to operate their own bodies. Parents and kids lurched along, hissing in Dutch. They were joined by taxi drivers and bike-delivery guys … and in the back of the horde, a police officer mounted on a black horse. The cop wore the face of a jack-o’-

lantern—like he had ripped it off an actual pumpkin and attached it to his face, which raised his ax-murderer vibe by a factor of twenty. His eyes glowed silver. In his hand was a black baton that kept flickering and shifting form, sometimes elongating into a rapier. Stuyvesant himself … now with a badge.

We know whose house this is, he said. *My mother must pay for her pagan crimes.*

I glanced at Annabeth. “Peter Stuyvesant … son of Hecate?”

“That wasn’t in the assigned reading,” Grover complained.

Annabeth muttered a curse. “I didn’t know. Will the torchlight keep out physical bodies, do you think?”

“GRRRRR,” said Hecuba, which I took to mean *I wouldn’t bet your candy corn on it.*

“Guard the doors,” I told Annabeth. “The rest of us will take down as many as we can.”

I charged into battle, followed by Grover, two hellhounds, and an angry polecat.

T H I RT Y- F O U R

We Fight for Hecate and Also Dead Fish Generally, attacking children with a sword is considered a no-no. Even if they are possessed by angry ghosts, you won’t get any points on the heroism leaderboards.

This made me worried about wading into the army of the dead. Trash zombies? No problem. I sliced and diced my way through them, reducing them to mounds of plastic bags, fruit rinds, and greasy cardboard. Spirits in empty costumes? Also no problem. Die, Disney Princesses! Die, generic Star Wars characters! Unfortunately, this only slowed the spirits down.

They drifted up from their ruined shells and began re-forming as soon as I moved on to the next shambling group of baddies.

The possessed humans were trickier to deal with. Normally, my Celestial bronze blade would pass harmlessly through mortals. It was meant for monster killing. But I didn't want to risk hurting the spirits' hosts. I tried to work around them, leaving them to Hecuba and Nope, who jumped on the delivery bikers and taxi drivers, knocking them down and subduing them with kisses. That would teach the ghosts!

Grover helped with the sorting. He danced around the edge of the mob, playing his panpipes. Once he made it to the gate, he skipped backward toward the park, blasting out the *Ghostbusters* theme song, which was guaranteed to enrage anyone with mortal ears. The possessed humans began peeling off from the other ghouls and staggering after our Pan-powered piper.

Gale ran around the yard, biting ankles and chattering insults, but this didn't seem to have much effect. Annabeth held the doors, using the torches to drive back any ghosts who got close. I imagined she was concentrating on one simple command: *NOPE!* Because that seemed to be the word of the week.

Some of the trash ghouls managed to climb the facade of the house. They rattled the windows and shook the iron filigree, but they weren't able to cause any real damage before disintegrating under the power of Hecate's torches and Annabeth's formidable *nope*-ness.

So far, Annabeth seemed to be holding her own. I knew how much those torches were taking out of her, though. We didn't have much time.

Unfortunately, the ghosts kept re-forming as fast as we cut them down.

They could probably do this all night. We could not. These dead didn't seem to have the same potency as Hecuba's Trojans. When they touched me, I didn't collapse into a dream vision. I saw snippets of things, but mostly it just hurt—like being snapped on the skin with a rubber band over and over and over. At first, it didn't bother me much, but after a while, the pain started to build. Gale's anti-ghoul salve had clearly worn off. I wished I could drink more nectar, even if it was candy-corn flavored, but I'd left the bandolier on the porch with Annabeth.

Meanwhile, the only possessed mortal seemingly unaffected by Grover's theme music was Policeman Pete. He'd probably never seen the Ghostbuster sequels and so didn't have any cultural context for the rage they inspired. He trotted back and forth on his black horse, directing his troops of Mandalorians, Cinderellas, and garbage mounds. His rapier/baton flickered at his side. His eyes glowed in his borrowed jack-o'-lantern face.

His trash- and costume-minions closed around me. Their smoky gray fingers slithered across my face and arms. Every time they made contact, I felt that sharp snap of pain. My whole body was as raw as an open blister. I was slowing down. Their voices echoed in my skull. *Hate. Cold. Unworthy to live.*

They were a ton of fun, these dead guys.

My knees were ready to buckle. If I went down under a mob of angry ghosts, I knew I wasn't going to get up again.

Then a different voice slipped into my brain. *Hey, kid, tag us in.*

I didn't know how, but it was Janet the eel.

I looked around. Of course there were no morays in the front yard. That was ridiculous.

We're still in our tank, Seaweed Brain, said Janet.

You don't get to call me that, I thought back.

Okay, then, Alley Boy. Tag us in!

What do you mean?

You want to talk, or you want help?

At the moment, help sounded better. *Okay, sure,* I thought. *But how?*

The eels were all about *show, don't tell*.

From the manse's entrance, four streaks of yellow shot out around Annabeth like streamers from a confetti cannon.

Charge! thought Janet.

For Hecate! Fortunato replied.

For dead fish! Larry said.

For more dead fish! said Bigwig.

The most disturbing thing was that I could distinguish the voice of each eel.

The door knockers cheered them on. "Go, my eels of doom!" "Go, my seventeen snakes of the apocalypse!" "KEY LIME PIE!"

Each eel was encased in a sheath of water. They zipped through the air as easily as if they were in the open sea. Was this Poseidon's doing? Hecate's magic? Some unholy union of the two? I had no idea. I guessed moray eels could pick up all sorts of tricks from living in Hecate's mansion and having their mucus scraped to make potions.

They wove through the ghostly crowd, boring holes in the chests of Star Wars characters and Disney Princesses alike. They seemed to know better than to kill the mortals, but getting slammed in the face by a sixty-pound eel could put down even the hardiest New York taxi driver.

I felt a spark of optimism. Maybe we could turn the tide!

My hopefulness didn't last long.

The eels had no better luck banishing the spirits than we did: They could cause chaos. They could knock delivery drivers unconscious. Yet the dead simply rose again in columns of gray dust and looked for new hosts.

Annabeth fell to one knee. She held the torches aloft and yelled

“BACK!” with as much energy as she could muster, but she was losing strength.

Grover had done too good a job attracting the possessed families of trick-or-treaters. They were now chasing him along the sidewalk across the street, trying to surround him. He played a few more bars of the *Ghostbusters* theme song, yelled “Help!” then continued to play. As slow as the possessed mortals were, I doubted my friend could evade them much longer. Hecuba and Nope panted as they leaped from ghoul to ghoul. So much body-slamming and kissing took a lot of energy. Gale burrowed through the trash ghosts, eating all the rotten fruit she could find, but they hardly seemed to notice.

I had to change tactics. Maybe if I struck off the head of this ghostly army …

“Pete!” I yelled. “Get your ghosts off my lawn!”

I figured my buddy Geras, the god of old age, would approve of my cranky shouting. I also suspected I might not be seeing Geras again, since I was likely to die right now in my prime. (Also, if this was my prime, that was a whole ’nother level of sad.)

Officer Stuyvesant turned his horse in my direction. His ax-murderer jack-o’-lantern mask grinned … because that’s all it could do. He raised his rapier/baton and clopped toward me in a leisurely fashion. He was in no hurry. The longer we living beings fought, the weaker we got.

I sliced and kicked and punched my way toward the horseman. Each time a ghost touched me, I lost more strength. Their emotions and memories washed over me. I saw myself racked by pain on my deathbed. I felt a coarse noose being slipped over my neck while a crowd jeered. A musket ball

ripped through my padded woolen doublet, piercing my chest, and blood soaked through my clothes. Good times in ye olde New Amsterdam.

I must have sliced through enough costumed ghouls to fill a discount Halloween warehouse. They just kept coming. My Celestial bronze blade didn't seem to do anything but make them angrier.

I searched for some kind of water source I could use …. Sprinklers?

Sewer lines? But I was already too weak. A sword, stubbornness, and cranky comments would have to do.

Behind me I heard Annabeth yelling at ghosts to back off. At least that meant she was still conscious. The Moray Eel Aerial Squadron zoomed around the yard, causing damage and consternation among the ghouls.

Grover kept piping his theme song.

I could do this. I waded through the dead. My teeth chattered. My feet felt like ice blocks.

'Twas a mistake to summon me, Stuyvesant's voice whispered in my mind. *On this night, of all nights. Witchcraft and devilry. Thinking you could control us with my mother's torches. She is the queen of abominations. Her servants must all burn.*

I'd heard of earworms, but his voice was more like a brain-eel.

(Apologies to my moray friends.) It locked its jaws around my cerebellum and refused to let go. I didn't understand everything Pete said. His accent was antique, his English heavily skewed, but there was something very

New York about his tone: hard, disdainful, unimpressed. I could easily imagine him banging on a car hood and yelling, *Watch where yer going! I'm haunting here!*

I kept marching toward him, my sword raised. As I got closer, I could see the police officer's eyes, glassy and unresponsive behind the jack-o'-lantern mask. I tried to reach out to the horse's mind, urging him to throw his rider.

Usually horses like me—it's a Poseidon thing. But this one wasn't interested, maybe because he was currently possessed.

Manhattan has become a monstrosity, Stuyvesant said. *This is my mother's legacy. Crossroads have ever been her domain, and all her roads lead to evil!*

Clearly the dude had some issues to work through, but I imagined he would see therapy as another form of witchcraft.

Stuyvesant swept his rapier at my head. I met the blade with Riptide, but I was more exhausted than I realized, or maybe Stuyvesant was just too strong. My sword flew out of my hand.

I faltered, barely avoiding another rapier slice.

"Percy!" Annabeth yelled. Her voice sounded miles away.

The ghosts piled on top of me, dragging me down with sheer numbers. I fell backward onto the cranium-stone path, looking up at the black horse now towering above me.

Die, said Stuyvesant's voice in my head. *Join us in the grave.*

His horse reared, then brought down both front hooves to crush my face.

T H I RT Y- F I V E

I Am Saved by My Own Doofus-ness Turns out dying has a theme song. It’s called “Strawberry Fields Forever.”

The horse’s hooves were an inch from my face when that song blasted from a nearby car horn. The noise startled some of the ghosts into evaporating. The horse pivoted on its back legs, giving me time to roll sideways just as Janet the eel hit Peter Stuyvesant in the face, nearly knocking him out of his saddle.

I got to my feet, gasping and weaponless but uncrushed. Pulling up to the curb was a white delivery van that looked very familiar. My vision was swimming, but I knew what words were painted on the side of the van: DELPHI STRAWBERRY SERVICE.

I *knew* I'd forgotten something important—again. We'd invited our friends to a Halloween party tonight and never canceled it. You see, kids?

Absentmindedness can save your life.

The side panel door rolled open and costumed demigods poured out.

Connor Stoll led the way, wearing a prisoner's orange jumpsuit with fake manacles on his ankles and wrists. "Dude, your yard decorations are fire!"

"They're real!" I yelled. "Real ghosts!"

More demigods emerged from the van—Clovis from the Morpheus cabin, wearing a nightgown, nightcap, and slippers, which was not very different from how he usually lounged at camp; Harley from Hephaestus, the youngest of our campers, encased in a Celestial bronze Iron Man suit he'd probably made himself; Valentina Diaz from Aphrodite, dressed in a black 1940s evening gown with white gloves, a broad-brimmed hat, and twenty different strings of pearls around her neck.

Valentina scanned the ghostly horde. "Gross. Can we fight them?"

"Yes, please!" Annabeth yelled from the porch.

Our friends charged into battle. Clovis waddled among the possessed people, yawning as he went. Coming from a child of Morpheus, that yawn was more infectious than the plague. The possessed crumpled on the spot and began to snore.

Meanwhile, Connor and Valentina and half a dozen other demigods waded into combat. Connor was pretty effective with his costume manacles.

Harley was a walking battering ram in his Bronze Man suit. Valentina's pearls doubled as lassos—garroting trash spirits, slashing costumes into shreds. Gale, Hecuba, and Nope bounded around the yard, alternately biting the dead and sniffing the newcomer demigods like, *Oh, hi, are you my friend?*

More passengers emerged from the van. I spotted Juniper with some other dryads and satyrs. She heard Grover across the street shouting for help, got a fierce look in her eyes, and handed one of the other dryads a big terra-cotta vase she was carrying. I guessed it contained a cutting from her life-source juniper bush.

“Hold my pot,” she ordered. Then she marched off to help her boyfriend.

I was feeling relieved until a rapier slashed the air just shy of my nose.

Officer Pete had regained control of his horse.

You must die, Stuyvesant said. *Witches. Heretics. My mother’s minions.*

“Dude, give it a rest,” I grumbled, dodging another swing.

My sword was nowhere to be seen. I patted my pockets. The pen would eventually return to me, but it hadn’t yet, and I didn’t have time to wait.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Annabeth on the porch, holding the spirit army at bay. She remained on one knee, her arms sinking lower and lower as she struggled to maintain the torches. I needed to help her, but Officer Pete was still in my face.

“Little help here?” I called out.

The eels flew in, wrapping themselves around Pete’s arms and neck, accessorizing his blue uniform with lovely yellow coils. Stuyvesant gurgled and struggled, trying to shake them.

Then a large figure came around the front of the van. I guess I hadn’t seen him yet because he’d been fighting across the street. It was our old friend Argus—camp security officer, van chauffeur, and the most useful combat Uber driver you could ever want.

He had bright blue eyes all over his massive body. For Halloween, he’d chosen the Amelia Earhart look. He’d donned old-fashioned pilot’s jodhpurs, leather boots, and a long white scarf. Across his bare chest and arms, he’d

covered each eye with an aviator’s goggle, so he looked like a massive suction-cup experiment gone wrong. He strode toward Officer

Pete, got his arms under the belly of the horse, and lifted it over his head—

Pete, eels, and all. (Argus, by the way, is pretty strong.) I wasn’t an expert on proper horse-lifting techniques, but Argus loved the pegasi at camp, so I figured he would be careful not to harm the animal. The horse, bewildered and possessed, just kept moving its legs through the air, getting nowhere, while Stuyvesant cursed in Dutch and demanded that we all burn in the eternal fires of wherever bad Dutch people went.

Argus looked at me and pointed his chin toward Annabeth. *Go.*

I sprinted for the porch. Our friends had evened up the fight, but the spirits still wouldn’t go away. All we could do was distract them, take away their toys (people, costumes, garbage), and try to avoid getting our own souls drained to the dregs. We needed to end this.

I made it to Annabeth’s side. She was so dazed she almost brained me with a torch before she realized I wasn’t a ghost.

“Hi,” she wheezed.

“We need to cross the torches,” I said. “Both of us, together.”

“We tried that.”

“Again,” I said. “While Stuyvesant is distracted.”

Pete peeled Bigwig the eel off his jack-o’-lantern face and tossed him aside. Argus’s arms were starting to shake under the weight of the horse and rider.

“We can’t risk it,” Annabeth said. “The spirits will break through!”

The ghosts made her point by rushing the front door. The fires held them at bay, but the whole house shook under the assault. Annabeth staggered, her back now against the door. The door knockers screamed and pleaded for their lives.

Annabeth tried to cross the torches by herself, but she didn't have the strength. "Too … too heavy."

"Hey, Wise Girl," I said, trying to keep the panic out of my voice, "be wise. I don't know much, but I *do* know we're stronger together. Always."

I'd finally found an argument Annabeth couldn't counter. She grunted assent and let me take the torch from her left hand.

The world seemed to gutter and darken along with the torchlight. The spirits swirled around us, howling in triumph as Hecate's power wavered.

"Hurry!" Annabeth yelled.

Standing side by side, we pulled in our torches. It was like arm-wrestling a tornado. I sensed that we had only seconds before the fires went out for

good. The torches weren't meant to be shared by two people.

Then again … Annabeth and I were more than just two people. We were a pair, and when we stood at the crossroads, we did it together. I screamed and forced my torch inward. Annabeth did the same.

Our friends kept fighting. Grover's panpipes had stopped. I didn't know if that was a good sign or a bad one.

The flames of our torches now burned as one. Just a little more until we could cross the handles … but the torches fought us, repelling each other like same-polarity magnets.

You cannot! cried the ghost of Stuyvesant. *Hecate must never—*

With one final burst of strength, we crossed the torches.

A blast of white-hot energy rippled outward from the porch. The ghosts dissolved into air. The police officer slumped in his saddle. The horse freaked out and whinnied, *Why am I flying?* before Argus set him gently down and let him gallop away with his unconscious rider. Trash and empty

costumes blew across the yard. The people Clovis had put to sleep started to wake up again.

The last ghost standing was the coal-dust cloud of Peter Stuyvesant, now without a human host. He was dissolving slowly, returning to the shadows, but he kept wailing, his angry voice turning desperate, almost heartbroken.

I cannot go, he howled. *I cannot allow her to stay in my city. …*

Clovis walked over to the fading ghost. He frowned at the swirling coal particles like they were the remnants of a dream—something that had made sense right until the moment he woke up.

“It’s okay, cousin,” Clovis said. “It’s a big city now. It belongs to all of us. You’ve done your part. Now you deserve a rest. Bring it in.”

Clovis embraced the ghost, and with a long sigh, Stuyvesant let go and dissolved.

Connor Stoll sauntered toward us, grinning happily. His manacles must have come off in the melee.

“You guys sure know how to throw a party!” he said. “Can we come in now, or what?”

T H I RT Y- S I X

I Skip the Celebration

I’m not going to say it was a wild party—not as wild as fighting the dead, anyway.

But it was a *good* party, because we were still alive and with our friends.

The Apollo cabin provided the tunes, compliments of Austin Lake and his mega-tech portable sound system. We even convinced him to play some pop instead of freestyle jazz fusion, which was his normal go-to. Connor supplied snacks and beverages. I was pretty sure they’d been pilfered from the camp commissary, but I wasn’t going to complain since it limited the wear and tear on Hecate’s kitchen.

The nymphs and satyrs brought the boogie. Dryads can dance for *days*, which is not what you might expect from evergreens and shrubbery. The satyrs busted moves that would've been impressive in any German disco.

Grover played his panpipes along with some of the songs—kind of a new sound for the Weeknd tracks, but he made it work.

Meanwhile, Argus stayed by the entrance, glowering and making sure things didn't get out of hand. We were used to him being our chaperone, so that was cool. A few times, trick-or-treaters even knocked on the front door.

How they found the house through the Mist, I'm not sure, but they all complimented us on the wild talking door knockers. Argus gave the kids candy from our stash and sent them on their way before they could ask too many questions about his bare-chested, hundred-eyed aviator costume.

The animals seemed to enjoy themselves. The moray eels only returned to their tank after showing us their favorite line dances and being bribed with extra helpings of frozen fish. Hecuba turned out to be a Beyoncé fan, judging from how she howled during "Texas Hold 'Em." Gale got into a long conversation with Juniper about the amazing potions one could make out of juniper oil. Nope made dozens of new friends and managed not to pee on any of them. Maybe that was something he only did with his favorite trio.

I was sorry Mrs. O'Leary wasn't here. Seeing her so briefly on Tuesday had just made me miss her more, but I guess it was for the best. I wasn't

sure Hecuba and Mrs. O'Leary would've gotten along. Two dog mamas in one house might have caused problems. I told myself I would see my hellhound friend soon enough in California. I had to stay optimistic.

Most importantly, we managed to have a good time without re-trashing the manse. The only damage that occurred was when Valentina Diaz demonstrated her pearl necklaces of death and took out a light fixture.

Thankfully, Harley was able to fix it—it's always good to have the Hephaestus cabin around.

"Who are you supposed to be, anyway?" I asked Valentina.

She looked at me like I was from Mars. “Coco Chanel, obviously!

Scariest problematic fashion icon ever. Boo!”

I nodded like I knew what she was talking about. I’d seen how easily she could decapitate ghouls with her jewelry, and I didn’t want to make her angry.

Later, I wandered upstairs and found Annabeth on a third-story terrace that looked out over Gramercy Park. I didn’t even know the house *had* a terrace, but since the place was magic, I didn’t question it.

“Want some company?” I asked.

She patted the empty space next to her.

We sat in silence. It was nice to be able to do that with Annabeth. We never felt the need to be witty or cool with each other. We could just be ourselves. That was enough.

“I almost got us killed tonight,” she said.

That was neither witty nor cool, and I could tell it had been bothering her.

“You’re being too hard on yourself,” I said.

She shook her head. “I heard Stuyvesant’s voice. Thinking I could summon a spirit like him on Halloween. Thinking I could handle those torches by myself … That was a mistake, like he said.”

I had a feeling she wasn’t such a fan of Peter Stuyvesant anymore. And honestly … same.

“It worked out,” I said. “The house got fixed.”

“Yes, but …” She shuddered. “My fatal flaw got in the way again. If I’d lost you because of my own pride …”

I took her hand. Her fingers were cold. “You’re not getting rid of me that easy. We’ve all got our fatal flaws, right? If yours is hummus …”

She laughed weakly. “Hubris.”

“That’s what I said. I am fine with it. It balances out my flaw of being too modest about my incredible dance moves.”

“Um, nice try.”

“Besides, I gotta believe we’re a good team because we make each other’s fatal flaws into slightly less fatal flaws. Like, maybe even fatal strengths.”

She squeezed my hand. “That doesn’t even make sense, Seaweed Brain.

But I appreciate the thought. So you’re saying I shouldn’t feel guilty?”

“None of us should. Grover’s fatal flaw is apparently strawberry milkshakes, right? But sometimes life gives you strawberry milkshakes.

Then you gotta count on your friends to look out for you. We’re a team.

How many times have you propped me up?”

“I’ve lost count.”

“Exactly.”

She studied my face. You’d think she would’ve known it pretty well by now, but she seemed surprised, like she saw something on it she’d never noticed before.

“What?” I asked. “Queso on my chin?”

“No,” she said. “Well, actually, yes. But I was thinking you’re a pretty smart guy.”

“Could you say that again? I must’ve misheard you.”

She pushed me playfully. “I mean it. And I can tell you’re planning something. All that history about Hecate and her school, all the ghosts and regrets hanging around this place. We repaired the house, but we’re not done yet, are we?”

“No,” I agreed.

I told her what I was planning to say to Hecate when she got home in the morning.

Annabeth raised an eyebrow. “Risky.”

“Yeah. I think you and Grover should clear out first. I don’t want this to blow up in your faces if she doesn’t take it well.”

“Hey, what did you just say about propping each other up? We’re not going anywhere.”

I let out a breath I’d been holding for too long. “Okay. If you’re sure.”

She leaned against me. “I actually feel better now. Thanks for talking it through. And for doing the right thing, even if it’s risky.”

“You want to get back to the party?”

“Nah.” She kissed me. “I’m good.”

We sat for a while together, and I had to agree. We were pretty good.

T H I RT Y- S E V E N

I Play with Purple Fire

There should be a rule that goddesses can never come home before 8:00

a.m.

Hecate blazed into the mansion at exactly 5:32.

I knew this because when I shot awake to the sound of trumpets and roaring flames, I found the goddess stepping through a fiery portal into the great room. Behind her, just for an instant, I saw a glowing golden clock—

the one in Grand Central Station. The image of the clock hands set to such an offensive time was burned into my retinas.

Why Hecate had decided to portal from a train station just up the street, I had no idea. Maybe she liked the coffee at Café Grumpy.

“I HAVE RETURNED!” Hecate announced, as if we might have missed that fact. Her voice shook the living room.

We all reacted in our own particular ways. Annabeth got to her feet, rubbed her eyes, and bowed to the goddess like this was something she did every morning. I tried to rise, became entangled in my sleeping bag, and fell sideways onto a coffee table. Grover leaped into the air like a startled cat.

As for the animals, Hecuba and Gale took things in stride. The hellhound stretched, shook herself, then plodded over to sniff Hecate and find out where she’d been. The polecat climbed the goddess’s dress, settled around her shoulders, and let loose a welcome-home fart. Nope, who had never met the goddess, decided *nope*. He hid behind Annabeth’s legs.

Hecate looked like she’d had quite a Halloween. Something red was splattered on her orange gown—maybe wine, maybe blood, maybe I didn’t want to know. Confetti covered her shoulders like rainbow snow. An overflowing plastic jack-o’-lantern bucket hung from her wrist. When she bent down to pet Hecuba, Smarties and Reese’s Pieces spilled out.

She was also rocking her three-headed beast form, with some terrifying modifications. Someone had face-painted the horse’s visage to look like a Rainbow Pony. The lion’s head wore a cheap mask of some old politician’s face …. Give me a second. Richard Nixon. That’s the guy. The dog’s head

wasn’t in costume, but it grinned and panted and drooled like it had just run ten miles and needed a bowl of water.

Gale scurried down the goddess’s arm and burrowed into the candy bucket, probably looking for chicken carcasses.

Hecate straightened. She scanned the great room, looking for anything out of place. She zeroed in on the hellhound puppy cringing behind Annabeth.

Nothing escaped the keen gaze of the goddess.

“Who is that?” she asked.

“This is Nope,” Annabeth said. “We found him abandoned in an alley.

Hecuba was nice enough to adopt him.”

Hecate’s three heads all tilted in sync. “Hecuba was … nice?”

Hecuba barked, a tone of challenge in her voice.

“No, of course,” Hecate said. “I’m just … surprised. Come here, little one.”

Nope cautiously slinked out from his safe space and padded over to the goddess. Hecate scratched behind his ear, which seemed to melt his fears.

He thumped his leg and peed happily on the carpet.

“Nope!” he barked.

“What a good boy,” Hecate said.

Grover cleared his throat. “He, um, says he’ll call you Third Mom.”

“Awww,” Hecate said. “He’s trying to say Triple Mom. That’s so cute!

Well, if Hecuba has adopted you, I am happy to have you in the family.”

Her form shimmered and changed into her at-home appearance: a single-faced, middle-aged lady in yoga pants and a T-shirt. She drifted through the room, running her fingers across the furniture. “So, Percy Jackson, did you have any difficulties?”

I’d been preparing for this conversation. But I’d been planning to have it when I was awake.

“Nothing we couldn’t handle,” I started. “I did want to ask—”

“Aha!” Hecate shouted, startling Gale out of the jack-o’-lantern. The goddess scooped up a plastic container from behind the couch—

somebody’s empty soda bottle from the party. Judging from the orange residue in the bottom, I figured it was Connor Stoll’s. He had a thing for Sunkist Zero Sugar.

“What is this?” Hecate demanded. “Trash?”

Her silhouette blazed with purple fire. Nope whimpered and hid behind Hecuba. Grover yelped. “We can explain!”

The goddess laughed. The flames died. “I’m kidding.”

She grinned mischievously. “You had some friends over? I would expect nothing less to celebrate my holiest of nights. Don’t worry about it.” The bottle turned to ash in her fingers. “But seriously, plastic containers aren’t good for the earth. You should use Celestial bronze or ceramic.”

“Got it.” I calmed my nerves by imagining kicking Connor in the pants.

“Could I—?”

“My pets look happy,” Hecate continued. “The manse is in good condition. You remembered to feed the eels?”

I had a flashback to Janet and the boys doing the macarena the night before. “Of course,” I said. “The eels are good. I—”

“Then I am pleased!” Hecate announced. “You have earned my recommendation letter.”

She wasn’t making it easy for me to get a word in. With a flourish of her wrist, a scroll appeared in her hand. “I spent a long time writing this. I think you will love it.” She handed me the parchment.

Even before I opened it, I was relieved. If Hecate had taken the time to write anything, it was already better than the letter I’d gotten from Ganymede. He’d given me a blank piece of paper that I had to fill in myself.

I opened the scroll. It was done in red ink, in cursive, which made it almost impossible for my dyslexic eyes to decipher. But I finally puzzled out:

To Whom It May Concern:

I recommend Percy Jackson for things.

Sincerely,

Hecate, the Goddess of Three Forms, Lady of Witchcraft, Queen of the Darkness, Keeper of Mysteries, Ultimate Power over Ghosts and Spirits, Almighty Sovereign of the Shadows I could have argued that the signature was longer than the actual letter. Or that *things* could've meant a death sentence, torture, extra homework.

Instead, I said, "Thank you, Lady Hecate. But before we leave—"

"Oh, yes, I know," she assured me. "Never fear! I will definitely be calling you for pet-sitting services in the future. Now, if there's nothing else

…"

I glanced at Hecuba and Gale, who were staring at me like, *Dude, you promised.* Even Grover and Annabeth were waiting for my cue. I got the feeling they wouldn't blame me if I bowed out gracefully.

Then it occurred to me that, whether Hecate knew it or not, she was offering me another crossroads—a temptation just as dangerous as the strawberry milkshake. It would be too easy to leave now with my recommendation letter. It would be a hundred percent safer. It would also be wrong.

"There *is* something else," I said.

Hecate frowned. "Oh?"

"Everything is fine now," I said, "but the week *wasn't* fine. We owe you the truth."

I told her the whole story—from the strawberry apocalypse, to finding Nope, to Hecuba's shadow-world excursion, to Gale's indentured servitude at the perfume shops, to our Halloween hijinks with Peter "Burn the Heretics" Stuyvesant.

While I spoke, Hecate remained absolutely still. When I finished, she glanced to either side as if she'd found herself standing at her own crossroads and, for once, had no idea where she was.

"That is"—she considered her words—"quite a story. I did not take you for a fool, Percy Jackson. Why would you confess this? Why should I not incinerate you?"

"You could," I agreed. "But the truth is, we didn't take care of Hecuba and Gale. They took care of us. Hecuba needs more freedom. She needs your trust. Gale, too. She should be allowed to practice alchemy in her own lab."

Gale squeaked.

"Right," I said. "With assistants. With opposable thumbs."

The purple flames flickered again around Hecate's body. "You dare to make demands of me?"

Annabeth and Grover tensed. I got the feeling they were prepared to jump in front of me, to shield me from Hecate's wrath. I couldn't let it come to that.

Somehow, I held the goddess's gaze. I didn't even wet my pants. Because heroism.

"I'm trying to show you the best path," I said. "Whether you take it …

that's up to you. But Grover drinking that strawberry potion and tearing up

the manse—in a way, it's the best thing that could've happened. I think, on some level, you *meant* for it to happen. We got the pets back, but now we understand what they need. We repaired the mansion, but its foundation has been cracking for over a century. Our architect, Annabeth, figured that out.

You've got a ghost problem. Old regrets. Old grudges. We saw that last night when we met your son Pete."

Hecate closed her eyes. Was that a tear tracing down the side of her nose?

"Peter was … not my best attempt at parenting." Her expression hardened again. "But how dare you presume—"

"Just hear me out," I pleaded. "We owed it to you to fix what we broke.

But the manse is still broken. I know how you can repair it. To make it worthy of you"—. gestured at the pets—"and your family. Consider it a request, not a demand."

Hecate's flaming aura remained at *simmer*. Her eyes seemed to drill into my soul, trying to figure out how I could be so brash as to talk to a goddess this way. It was not the first time a god had looked at me like that.

Finally, she barked out a brittle laugh.

"You have surprised me, Percy Jackson," she said. "That does not happen often."

She glanced at Nope, who was still hiding behind his dog mama, Hecuba.

"I suppose you have brought me a new family member," the goddess conceded, "which means I owe you a boon in return. Speak, and I will decide whether it is something I can grant, or whether I must feed you all to my eels."

I told Hecate my idea.

T H I RT Y- E I G H T

I Accidentally Liquefy My Guidance Counselor

“You’re alive!” said Eudora when I walked into her office on Monday morning.

“You don’t have to sound so surprised.”

“No, I’m not—All right, yes, I’m surprised. How did you do it?”

I sat down next to Sicky Frog and told Eudora about our Halloween walking tour with the dead. Judging from the salt water that trickled down her hairdo, just hearing about it made Eudora feel anxious.

“That’s … terrifying.” She shook her head. “And the recommendation letter?”

I showed her the parchment. She spent a long time reading it, lovingly caressing the words until I started to wonder if she was looking for any sign that Hecate might have mentioned her.

Annabeth, Grover, and I had ended up spending the rest of the weekend at the manse. Partly because Hecate had wanted us to hang around so she could hear more details about our plan. And partly, I think, because she was holding us hostage in case she changed her mind about feeding us to the eels. Also, it gave her a couple extra days of complimentary pet-sitting. But we didn’t mind that. Walking Hecuba, Gale, and Nope had become something I actually looked forward to, as long as Hecuba didn’t drag me through the shadow-world into random department stores.

During our time with her, Hecate *had* mentioned Eudora several times. I didn’t want to tell my counselor how many curse words had been sprinkled through those conversations until the goddess finally calmed down.

Eudora looked up and sighed contentedly. “That’s her writing, all right.

Oh, Percy, what a triumph! This will look wonderful with your college application. And if New Rome doesn’t work out, this could get you into any number of excellent technical schools!”

“Um … New Rome will work out. I only need one more letter, right?”

“Of course.” She traced her fingers over the red cursive. I started to worry she might keep the document as a memento, so I figured I should

break my other news.

“Also,” I said, “Hecate owed me a boon. And I collected.”

Eudora’s eyes widened behind her bottle-thick glasses. “A boon? Oh, my! What did you ask for? Can—can I see it? Is it a lock of her hair? An autographed photo?”

“Even better,” I said. “I convinced her to reopen her magic school.”

Eudora melted into water.

That’s not a metaphor. She actually dissolved into a large puddle all around her office chair. I stood, worried that I’d killed her. Did I need to dive in and save her? I wasn’t a registered lifeguard. My job was ocean, not saving Nereids from their own puddles.

“Hello?” I called. “Are you okay down there?”

The puddle rippled. It bubbled, then seeped together into a waterspout that got taller and taller until Eudora stood before me, fully herself again. I wondered how her shell-do liquefied, not to mention her glasses.

“I—I can’t believe this,” she sobbed. “Did you actually—Did I hear you right?”

“Yeah. I convinced her to give it another shot. Like you said, there are so many potential students in the world, and they don’t all belong at camp.”

I suppressed a shudder, thinking about the Aeaean naiads, who I definitely wouldn’t want showing up at our campfire sing-along with their spritz bottles of Fancy Water.

“They need the school,” I said. “And Hecate needs the school. The manse hasn’t been right since she shut it down. What’s more, Hecate could use the help. She’s great at offering a crossroads. She’s not so great at ushering people through them. She needs somebody who can advise her students, guide their choices, let them move on when they finish their studies.”

“Does that mean …?” Eudora’s voice was no more than a squeak.

“She’s rehiring you as her admissions director. Full-time.” Then I added quickly, “But only after you’re done helping me out with this semester, of course.”

“EEP!” Eudora forgot about etiquette and personal boundaries. She came around the desk to hug me. She picked me up, swung me around, then put

me down and did a happy jig. “THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK

YOU!”

“It’s okay.” I grinned. “Totally fine. Just, uh, keep doing a great job helping me get into college, okay?”

“Oh, I will! I will get you into *all* the colleges!”

“Just New Rome would be great.”

“New Rome it is! Oh! Oh!”

She danced around the room, hugged her office chair, and then tried to hug Sicky Frog. She seemed to have forgotten all about me. That was okay.

I figured my work there was done, so I headed to first period, where I doubted the teacher would be so happy to see me.

I made it through my day somehow, though I may have fallen asleep in class once. Okay, three times.

After dismissal, I started heading back to Gramercy Park, thinking I should walk a certain flatulent polecat and two hellhounds who would really need to pee. I was kind of sad when I realized I didn’t have to do that anymore. On the bright side, I could go home … but first, I stopped by the Cracked Teapot.

My mom was standing by her usual table, rubbing her back. She was staring at her computer screen as if it had offended her.

“Writer’s block?” I asked.

“Percy!”

She hugged me tight, though she did not pick me up and spin me around, which wouldn’t have been good for her or me or the baby. With Grover’s help, I’d sent her a note by wind spirit on Saturday morning, just to let her know I was alive, but still, it was great to see her in person.

“Not writer’s block,” she said. “Writer’s back.” She rubbed her lower spine. “How did it go with Hecate? Tell me everything!”

I gave her the rundown while we ordered another pot of tea and I ate a cookie. Again, I felt lucky I didn’t spend every day writing here, or I’d eat way too much sugar, which, to be honest, I did anyway.

When I finished my story, my mom beamed. “You did something wonderful, Percy.”

“Yeah, well … if you ever change your mind about studying witchcraft, I know a goddess.”

She laughed. “Not likely. I’m happy with my choices. But what you did for Eudora, and Hecate, and the animals … You left them in a better place than you found them. And happier. That’s a very Percy thing to do, and I’m proud of you.”

I was way too old and cool to be affected by a compliment from my mom. I didn’t blush or fidget or anything. I tried to say something, but I had

a lump in my throat. Probably just a piece of cookie.

“So, are you coming home tonight?” my mom asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Is it okay to have Grover and Annabeth over? And maybe Juniper? She discovered that plants ride free on the Long Island Rail Road because nobody notices them.”

“Of course!” my mom said. “It’s been ages since I’ve seen Juniper. But you might want to do your laundry before they come over.”

“Oh. Right.”

My mom had stopped doing my laundry this year. She said I needed practice doing it myself. So far, I was getting a lot of practice letting it pile up. I was probably also getting practice letting new life-forms develop in the hamper.

“Sure,” I said.

“And I’d love help getting the living room tidied up,” she added. “And

__”

“Got it,” I said. “The usual chores. I don’t suppose you’ll write me a college recommendation letter for doing them?”

“They wouldn’t believe me. I’m too biased about how wonderful you are.

And you’ll be even *more* wonderful when you do those chores! Now, I really ought to finish this chapter, or I’ll never hit my word count for the day. See you at home?”

I headed back to the apartment, and even though I had laundry and vacuuming to do, I found myself smiling. Sometimes chores aren’t so bad, especially when it means getting ready for a family dinner.

T H I RT Y- N I N E

I Get My Favorite Dessert

Annabeth dropped by early to help make dinner with my mom, my stepdad, and me.

Grover and Juniper showed up about an hour later. Being thoughtful, Grover brought my mom a potted orchid. Being a dryad, Juniper brought a juniper seedling—meaning part of her life-source. I hoped we wouldn't get confused and end up planting Juniper in a pot by mistake. Otherwise, she'd end up having to live at the Jackson-Blofis apartment. If the orchid had a name, Grover didn't introduce them.

I hadn’t seen my stepdad Paul all week, so he filled me in on what was happening at his high school—all the funny stories about his colleagues and his students. The only thing I regretted about having Paul in the family was that I’d never gotten to have him as a teacher. I suspected I would’ve enjoyed his class. He cracked us all up talking about his friend Mr. Bigly (yeah, real name), who got halfway through his PowerPoint presentation on the periodic table before realizing he was showing the kids a slideshow of his family trip to the Grand Canyon.

“And I heard you saw Ch—Mr. Brunner,” Paul added.

“You can call him Chiron,” I said. “Everybody here knows.”

“Oh, right.” Paul grinned sheepishly. It was sometimes hard to keep track of who knew about who in Greek Mythology World. “Well, I’m glad he finished up at Alternative High. He’s supposed to sub for me next Thursday when I have jury duty.”

I tried to imagine Chiron teaching Paul’s class. It was almost as weird as imagining Paul on jury duty. If he got impaneled, Paul would probably have the whole jury performing scenes from Shakespeare within a few days.

Chiron would have Paul’s students sparring with swords, which Paul would probably be fine with.

“Juniper, dear,” my mom said, “is salad all right for you? I didn’t even think to ask what dryads find appropriate.”

Juniper grinned. “That is so thoughtful. I’m fine with salad, Sally, but thanks for asking. Dryads will eat just about any nutrients we can absorb.”

Leave it to my mom to ask. I’d never even considered whether dryads ate. I should’ve been more sensitive, I guess. Sometimes folks at camp asked if I avoided eating seafood because I was the son of Poseidon and could talk to fish or whatever. I always answered that no, I ate fish. Have you ever talked to one? They don’t have a lot to say. Mostly it boils down to *Are you food? Am I food?* Eating them is the only way to answer the question.

Obviously, I don’t consume the smart species like octopuses, dolphins, sharks, and manta rays. Dude, if you ever need an animal to help with your physics homework, manta rays are geniuses.

Grover and Juniper set the table. Usually that was my job, but it was fun watching them being domestic together. Can nature spirits be called domestic? Whatever. They were cute, nudging each other and giggling and making moony eyes.

Annabeth got the casserole out of the oven as she chatted with Paul about her latest architecture assignment. Paul seemed to find her schoolwork fascinating, though he didn’t know much about design. My mom just hummed to herself and smiled, happy to be surrounded by positive energy.

Once at the dinner table, we dug in. Grover, Annabeth, and I recounted the adventures of the week, trying to focus on the stuff that was funny in retrospect, not the stuff that almost got us killed. Sometimes it was hard to separate the two, but my mom was in tears laughing when I recounted my wild ride through the lingerie department with Hecuba, a detail I had previously omitted.

“I should’ve had you pick up some things for me,” she said.

“Don’t make it weirder,” I grumbled.

“And this recommendation letter,” Paul said. “Did it really just say Hecate recommends you for *things*?”

“Well, yeah.”

“So we don’t get to help you write your own letter this time,” my mom said. “That’s a shame.”

I shuddered. I did not want team-writing my recommendation letters to become a tradition.

“Does well with animals,” Grover volunteered.

“Is widely traveled,” Annabeth added.

“Wears a bra on his ankle,” Juniper offered, then frowned. “Sorry. I have trouble with human jokes. Was that too much?”

Everybody laughed. Even I smiled.

“Okay, ha-ha,” I said. “We can add those to my third letter, if I ever get it.”

“Oh, you will,” Annabeth said.

“We’ll be here to help you!” Grover promised. “Even if it means that you two have to leave for California afterward.”

“Hey, now,” said Juniper, squeezing Grover’s wrist. “I told you, don’t worry about that. Because no matter where you go, your roots are where you’re planted. And this right here”—she gestured around the table—“these are Percy’s and Annabeth’s roots.”

That stopped us. Sometimes the greatest wisdom comes from a juniper bush.

“Of course,” Grover said. “And my girlfriend’s roots are literally right here.” He nudged the juniper clipping she had brought.

We all laughed, but Juniper was right. Looking around the table, I knew I was where I belonged, and even if we moved across the country, Annabeth and I would always have a home here. We wouldn’t be leaving anything behind. We’d just be spreading out our branches.

“Well,” I said, “in that case, what’s for dessert?”

“How ’bout this?” Annabeth kissed me, which was better than any dessert—and *a whole lot* better than candy corn.

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HALF GOD

ALL HERO

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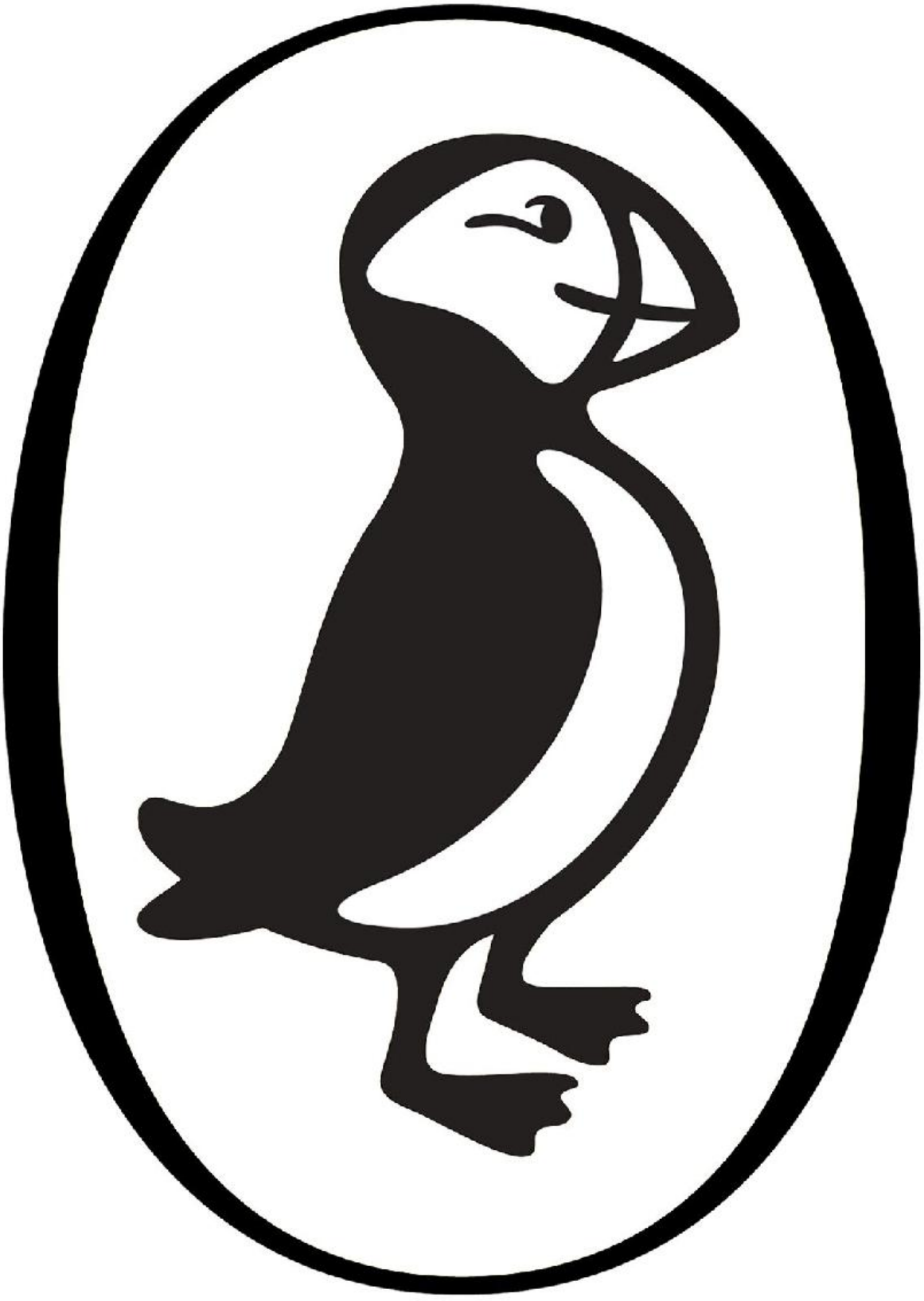

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- 4 • Turns Out I Am Salmon-Flavored
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- 6 • Raw Chicken Carcasses and Where to Find Them
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- 28 • I Make a Bad Plan
- 29 • I Get All the Candy

- 30 • We Goo Up for Battle
- 31 • We Find Some Different Dead Guys
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- 33 • We Have a Good Old-Fashioned Witch Burning. (It’s Us. We’re the Witches.)
- 34 • We Fight for Hecate and Also Dead Fish
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